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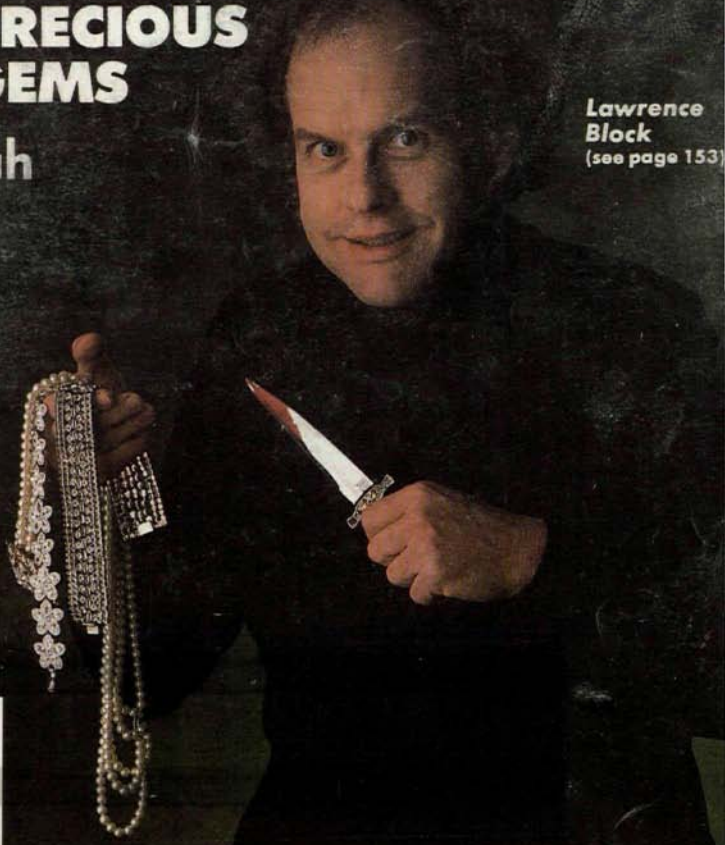

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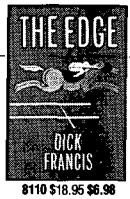

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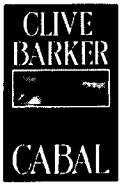

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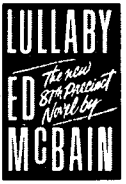

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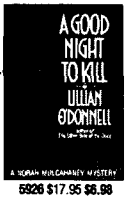

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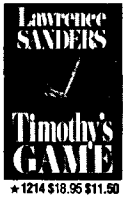

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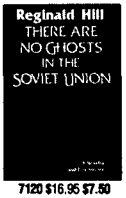

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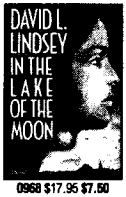

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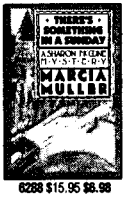

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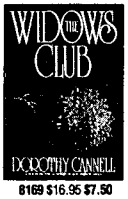

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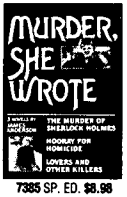

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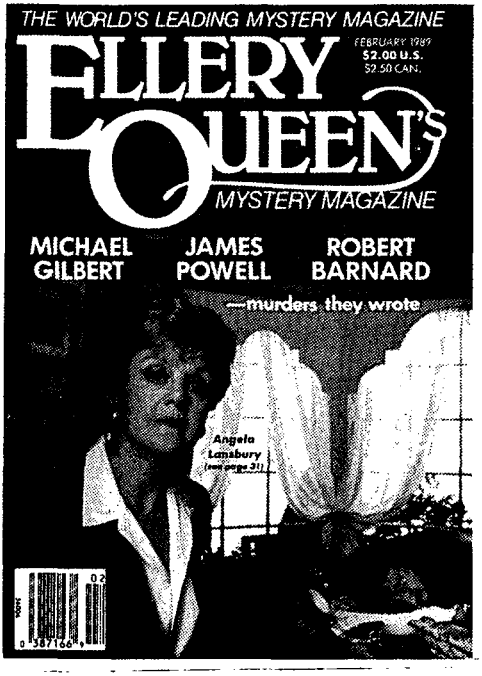

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a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story by

JEREMIAH HEALY

His brother-in-law Michael was an obnoxious dude, Rick Dumars told Cuddy. "I can see him hearing a burglar, walking in on him all indignantlike, saying, 'And just what do you think you're doing in my house?' He was like that. Talked like that, too."

"Anybody you know would kill him?"

"You mean, like if it wasn't a burglar?"

"Right."

"I don't know. I mean, Michael was obnoxious, but would it be worth the heat to do him? I don't know, man."

Jeremiah Healy's first novel about Boston private detective John Francis Cuddy was So Like Sleep. *His latest,* Swan Dive *(Harper & Row), is winning high praise.* Publishers Weekly *said: "A beguiling sense of humor, ingenious plotting, and avoidance of shallow sentimentality are traits that take Healy's novels to the top."*

We're proud to present Mr. Healy's and Mr. Cuddy's first appearance in our pages . . .

ONE EYE OPEN

by JEREMIAH HEALY

Craig Abbot's office featured blond-oak furniture, an onyx desk set, and a view of Boston's waterfront that a harbormaster would envy. I'd known that he was a domestic-relations attorney. It looked as though he was a successful one.

Abbot said, "Please, take a seat, Mr. Cuddy. I really appreciate your coming over on such short notice."

"The meeting may be shorter than the notice. As I told your secretary when she called me, I don't do divorce work."

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Abbot grinned affably. Insurance agents and divorce lawyers always grin affably. "When I called my contact on the Boston force, he told me John Francis Cuddy was a reliable private investigator with substantial criminal experience. That's what I need for this case."

"Go ahead."

"I also require discretion and confidentiality."

I said, "What you say to your client is within the attorney-client privilege, right? What I look into and tell you is also within that privilege, since I'm acting as your representative. Or it's within the investigator-client confidentiality my licensing statute imposes on me."

"Very good." Abbot leaned back in his judge's swivel chair, crossing his legs. Around six feet tall, brown wavy hair, fairly trim. Good-looking in a post-preppy way, he seemed mid-forties, but his out-of-season tan might mask another five years.

"Until recently I represented Wendy Steinberg in the divorce case brought by her husband Michael."

"He the Steinberg killed in the burglary last month?"

"Correct. Under the ante-nuptial agreement they signed, Michael was to retain all the property he brought into the marriage, including his family home in Beacon Harbor. He was killed there, apparently by a thief."

"If I remember the news accounts, his sister brought suit, claiming your client was the killer."

"Correct again. Naturally, I believe it an action totally without merit, but Lissa—Michael's sister—found an attorney who disagreed." Abbot used about six syllables to bring out "attorney," as though we were talking about the lowest form of life on the planet. I was thinking about people in glass houses.

"The case having been brought, however, it must be defended and dispelled. That's where you come in. I want you to look into the matter and prove, if you can, that Wendy is innocent."

I considered things for a moment.

Abbot said, "Well, are you interested?"

"What do the cops say?"

"You mean about Wendy's involvement?"

"That's what I mean."

"I suppose it's no secret that the spouse is generally on the top of the list, suspectwise. But here there is an interesting quirk which has them stymied. And which should win the civil suit for us."

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"Which is?"

Abbot reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a video-cassette case. He popped it open, showing me the cassette itself, then snapped it closed again. "This is a video deposition I took of Lissa two days ago. It jibes with what Wendy has told me. I'd like you to see it before I taint you any further with facts."

"You want me to hear the other side's version before you tell me yours?"

He slid the black container over to me. "I think you'll see what I mean."

Abbot's secretary plunked me in a corner of the library, started the video equipment, and left me. The camera focused on each person present, which included Lissa Steinberg, her lawyer (a bumbler in a polyester sportcoat named Treacy), and Abbot. Wendy Steinberg apparently decided not to attend. After the preliminaries of swearing the witness, we had lawyer-to-lawyer stipulations (including using first names for both female Steinbergs to keep straight who was who) and Lissa's educational background.

Abbot asked the questions, Lissa answered them. She sat tall, slim, and just on the plain side of pretty, with honey-colored hair clipped the way Dorothy Hamill used to wear hers.

"Now, Lissa, you met Wendy through Michael, correct?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell us how that came about?"

"I was appearing in a little-theater production, Michael brought Wendy to it, and we met at the cast party afterward."

"Would it be fair to say that you and Wendy became friends?"

Treacy said, "Object to the form of the question."

Abbot said, "What's your objection?"

"You've been leading the witness all over the place here."

Abbot said, "The witness is the adverse party. I can ask her leading questions."

When Treacy didn't reply, Abbot turned back to Lissa. "Again, would it be fair to say that you and Wendy became friends?"

"Yes."

"Close friends?"

Lissa bridled a little. Her large, sharp eyes darted left-right-left in a constant rhythm as she considered the question. "I'd say we saw each other once a week—maybe twice. Lunch, shopping, that sort of thing."

"Are you still an actress?"

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"No. I never was one, really. Not intending to make a career out of it, I mean. I'm in fashion design now. Women's outerwear."

"Calling your attention to the night Michael died, you were at Wendy's apartment in Boston, were you not?"

"Yes."

"On Commonwealth Avenue?"

"Yes."

"How did you come to be there?"

Lissa frowned. "Wendy and Michael were going through a divorce, as you well know. It was civilized, but it was still a divorce. Though I felt obvious loyalty to my brother, I wanted to let Wendy know that I still valued her friendship, that their split-up wasn't the end of us as well."

"Who invited whom?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Did Wendy invite you over?"

"No. No, I was in town anyway, and I just stopped by."

"Without calling first?"

"As I said, we were friends. Then."

"Yes, but I take it from your answer that Wendy couldn't have known you were coming, correct?"

Lissa paused.

Abbot said, "Lissa?"

"No. No, she couldn't."

"And you were having drinks, correct?"

"Yes."

"And a phone call interrupted?"

"Yes."

"And what happened next?"

Lissa squeaked in her chair, as though it were the wrong angle for her to be sitting. "Wendy said something like, 'Oh, Michael, Lissa's here now.' And I said, 'It's Michael?' And Wendy said, 'Yes, do you want to talk with him?' And before I could say anything, Wendy said, 'Michael? Michael, what is it?' "

"Can I interrupt you there?"

"You already have."

"What did Wendy's voice sound like as she was asking him what was going on?"

Treacy said, "Object to the form of the question. You can answer it if you can."

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Lissa looked at Treacy and then said to Abbot, "Wendy sounded concerned."

Abbot said, "What happened next?"

"I went up to the phone, and I heard—" Lissa produced a tissue from her lap and dabbed at her nose and eyes. Playing a little too hard to the balcony, she'd have to tone things down before the jury. "I heard Michael's voice say, 'Wait a minute. Wait, I think someone's in the house.' And then there was this noise, like hands clapping, three or four times. The police said those were the shots. And that's—that's the last time I heard his voice."

"Lissa, I realize this is difficult for you, but I need to go further. Would you like to take a break?"

Lissa shook her head. Abbot said, "I'm sorry, but you have to speak as well as gesture."

"Oh, sorry. No. No, I can go on now. Let's finish this."

"That night, what happened next?"

"We waited. We waited for Michael to come back on the phone, but he never did. After maybe five minutes, Wendy finally hung up and called the police."

"In Beacon Harbor?"

"Yes, not the Boston police."

"Lissa, assume for a moment that the telephone company shows Michael's call to Wendy originating at exactly 8:51 P.M. that night. Does that sound right to you?"

Treacy said, "Object to the form. You can answer it if you can."

Lissa said, "I wasn't staring at my watch."

Abbot said, "No, I didn't suppose you had been. I'm just asking if that sounds about right."

"I suppose so."

"Assume with me also that the call from Wendy to the Beacon Harbor Police Department is shown by both telephone and police records to have occurred at 8:54."

Treacy said, "Same objection to all the questions in this line."

Lissa said, "All right."

Abbot said, "It seems to me that what you've told us Wendy and Michael said to each other and the noise of the shots must have occupied some of that 8:51-onward time."

"It did."

"Therefore, it also seems that Wendy's call to the police must have been sooner than five minutes after the shots."

"Well, it seemed like five minutes. It seemed like five hours."

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"What did you do after Wendy called the police?"

"I ran out, got to my car, and drove back to Beacon Harbor."

"To your brother's house."

"To my parents' house. They left it to my brother."

"As they had a perfect right to do?"

Treacy said, "Objection."

Abbot said, "Strike the question. You drove to the Beacon Harbor house and—?"

"And there were police everywhere. They told me—they told me Michael was dead. Shot."

Abbot stopped until Lissa finished using her tissue again. Then he said, "Can you tell us what leads you to believe that Wendy had anything at all to do with your brother's death?"

Lissa became resolute. "She had everything to gain from it. If Michael had lived, the divorce would have gone through, and she'd have gotten almost nothing because of the ante-nuptial agreement. Since he died, she got half of his estate."

"And you got the other half?"

"Yes."

"Have you any evidence whatsoever that Wendy had anything to do with Michael's death besides the financial aspect?"

"No, not if you mean fingerprints or photographs or something. But it's just so cute, don't you see? She has me as her alibi! She must have set it up that way."

"But you told us that you just dropped in out of the blue. How could Wendy have been planning to have an alibi, much less you as that alibi?"

Lissa hung her head. "I don't know. I just think she did it, that's all."

The deposition tapered off from there. When it was over, I told the secretary I was finished with it. Then I told Abbot I was interested in the case. He said to do whatever I thought appropriate for the rest of the day, but to meet him at an address on Boylston Street the next morning at 9:30.

"Why?"

"Because Wendy is due at Treacy's office for her deposition, and I want you to meet her first."

"Joe Patrizzi."

"Sergeant, my name's John Cuddy."

"I know, I know. And drop the 'sergeant,' okay? Makes me feel

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like I'm still back in uniform, and I don't ever want to be doing that again, in Beacon Harbor or anywheres else."

Patrizzi sat down in his chair, a thin file open in front of him. "You're looking into the Steinberg killing."

"If I wouldn't be stepping on your toes."

"Good start. Around here, we don't get many homicides. Like maybe three in my ten years, anyway. What do you want to know?"

"How come you're not pressing the widow?"

Patrizzi shrugged. "We would if we could. She's got the deceased's sister as an alibi, thirty miles away while the guy's getting shot. Phone records and our log downstairs confirm the time of the calls. Kind of tough to show means and opportunity."

"Witnesses?"

"The house, it's on this nice cul-de-sac, maybe three blocks off the water. Nobody home either side, nobody heard any shots, and this Steinberg, he took three in the chest at close range. Only possible is this lady, out walking her dog, thinks she saw a skinny guy running down the street."

"Running?"

"Yeah, but not like jogging. 'Fleeing' was the word she used. She only saw him from the back. Hat or cap, broad shoulders, but otherwise skinny. Not much."

"Anything out of the ordinary at the scene?"

"Nah. The staties come in, dusted and fussed like they're supposed to, but nothing you could hang on the widow, even if she didn't have the alibi. Motive, now, motive we got up the ying-yang, but nothing else. Phone off the hook, like this guy Steinberg got interrupted on a call. Glass door to the garden broke in—some footprints in the flowerbeds near the patio. Body in the dining room, drawers—where you'd figure the silver was kept—they were pulled open. Pretty typical."

"Of a B&E gone sour."

"That's how I see it. The statie attached to the D.A. thinks the same. You wanna talk with her, I can give you the number?"

"No, thanks."

"Look, I don't mean to say we ain't on top of this here, but we checked the widow's bank accounts, phone records, charge cards, anything she might have used to set up or pay for a hit. Nothing out of the ordinary, everything squares. Even the D.A. don't wanna hear about it, and this is an election year."

"Thanks again."

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"Hey, no problem. Come back in the summertime. We got a great beach, and parking's only five bucks, even on the weekends."

"I'll keep it in mind."

Lawyer Treacy was in a dumpy building on upper Boylston Street. I spotted Craig Abbot in the lobby, looking around vaguely, like a man who got off the bus at the wrong stop. Not threatened, just inconvenienced. Next to him stood a frosted blonde in her early thirties wearing very becoming makeup. Her clothing was lifted from a Talbot's catalog. Trenchcoat, a white-cotton turtleneck with baby whales in baby-blue, and a navy herringbone skirt. She exuded the kind of distance that said, "Don't even bother asking me to dance, buddy."

"Ah, Mr. Cuddy. Wendy Steinberg, John Cuddy."

We shook hands perfunctorily as she said, "And just who are you, Mr. Cuddy?"

Abbot said, "He's a private investigator."

She showed no emotion. "Private investigator?"

"Yes. Mr. Cuddy is an experienced criminal investigator I hired. He'll blow Lissa's case sky high."

"But, Craig, I thought you told me Lissa's case had no merit, that she didn't have a shred of evidence."

"I did and she doesn't. Mr. Cuddy's job is to confirm that beyond doubt, so we can terminate this matter, hopefully without wasting much more of our time."

Wendy Steinberg shifted her gaze to me. Cool, appraising. She'd have made a hell of a bargainer at flea markets.

The elevator arrived, and we rode in silence to Treacy's floor.

The stenographer swore Wendy Steinberg, and Treacy had no objection to my sitting in. Lissa apparently decided not to attend. Reciprocally ignoring the opposition, maybe. No video equipment, just old-fashioned question and answer, with the stenographer taking things down phonetically on one of those little boxes with cashier's tape and odd keys.

It took all of five minutes to see that Treacy couldn't lay a glove on Wendy Steinberg.

He dragged her over the telephone sequence syllable by syllable. The ice maiden confirmed each material point of Lissa's recollections. Then Treacy said, "Wendy, you have a brother, right?"

"Yes."

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"Named Richard N-M-I Dumars, right?"

"What does N-M-I mean?"

"Uh, sorry. That's No Middle Initial."

"Then, yes—Rick Dumars is my brother."

"Younger brother?"

"Yes."

"Age twenty-eight?"

A flicker of a smile crossed Wendy Steinberg's lips. "Yes."

"Now, Wendy, I understand that Rick and Michael didn't exactly get along."

Abbot said, "Object to the form of the question, if it is a question. You may answer it, Wendy."

She said, "You objected, but I can answer it?"

"Yes."

"All right. Michael didn't get along with a lot of people. Rick and I were two."

The stenographer said, "Excuse me, is that T-w-o?"

Wendy smiled faintly again. "Yes. Of perhaps two thousand. T-w-o again."

The stenographer smiled back.

Treacy said, "Like I was saying, Rick and Michael didn't get along."

"No."

"Do you have any idea where Rick was the night your husband died?"

Wendy almost laughed in his face. "I believe he was performing that night."

"What does he do?"

"He's a guitarist in a band. A rock band."

"Where would he have been performing?"

"One of the student bars in Brighton or Allston. Why don't you ask him?"

Steinberg provided his address, spelling it out for the steno.

Treacy turned over the single, henscratched yellow paper he'd been using as a crib sheet for question topics. "Now, Wendy, it's certainly true that you and Michael were having marital problems, isn't that right?"

"I'd concede that his filing for divorce from me is proof of that."

"Right. And isn't it true that Michael was—uh, seeing someone else?"

Abbot said, "Objection. Instruct the witness not to answer."

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Treacy said, "Why?"

"On the record?"

"Yeah, on the record."

"My client is being sued by your client for wrongful death, Mr. Treacy. No one is suing Michael Steinberg or his estate for divorce any more, much less on the grounds of adultery. I don't see where any extramarital activities of Mr. Steinberg are relevant here."

"You don't?"

"No, I don't."

Wendy Steinberg said, "That's all right, Craig."

Abbot looked stunned, as though the file cabinet had just asked him to open it.

Wendy said to Treacy, "Michael was a louse, Mr. Treacy. His catting around wasn't something he should have been proud of, but I certainly have nothing to be ashamed of, either. Michael's affairee, as you lawyers might call her, is an advertising executive, Edwina Vole."

She then went on to spell the name for the stenographer.

Treacy finished up by 11:45. I declined Craig Abbot's lukewarm invitation to join Wendy and him for lunch because I sensed he wanted to scold her for running through his stop sign at the deposition. Besides, I had a few other people I wanted to see.

He came to the door in a pair of striped gym shorts and nothing else. He was angular but wiry, the way guys get when they're two years into a five-year sentence. The eyes were bleary, the skin pallid, the hair unstylishly long. Unstylish for most occupations, anyway.

"Rick Dumars?"

"Yeah. What do you want?"

"It's about your brother-in-law."

"My what?"

"Michael Steinberg."

"Oh, yeah. Right. Just a second."

He closed the front door to his apartment most of the way, leaving me to stand in the hall. Through the crack I heard him in another room say, "Well, where the hell did you leave your bra?"

Two minutes later he opened the door. "Sorry, man. The chick just can't get it together, know what I mean?"

"No problem."

"C'mon in."

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Dumars never asked for any identification. He'd pulled on a Benetton sweatshirt over the shorts and ran his hand like a rake through his hair as we took opposite seats on a couch and chair.

"So, what now?"

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about the night Michael Steinberg died."

"I already been over this with you guys, but go ahead."

"You can account for your time between eight and ten P.M.?"

"Yeah. Like I told the other cops, I was doing a gig at the Brown-Nose, over on Harvard Ave. I thought you guys already checked that out?"

"With the bartenders and all?"

"Yeah. The bartender, the doorman, him, and me had some—Coca-Cola between sets. Otherwise, I was onstage, setting up or playing, from eight, eight-fifteen on."

"Till?"

"Last call. What, one-thirty, I guess."

"How well did you know Michael?"

"Huh." Dumars swung his head around the room. Grad-student-quality furniture with undergrad-quality clutter. "Michael was real into things like possessions, man. Him and me weren't exactly golf buddies, you know."

"Ever been out to his house in Beacon Harbor?"

"Coupla times. My sister— You met Wendy?"

"I have."

"Well, her and me don't look much alike, but we get along okay. She invited me out there around the holidays, like a Thanksgiving, coupla years ago. Lissa—that's Michael's sister—she was there, too. That's the worst part of all this."

"What is?"

"The lawsuit and all. I mean, Lissa and Wendy, they were good friends, man—like maybe *best* friends, I'd say."

"Anything happen on Thanksgiving?"

"Huh?"

"The time you were at the house in Beacon Harbor."

"Oh. No, nothing happened, except Michael treated me like I was a crasher or something."

"Gate-crasher?"

"Yeah, like that. Obnoxious dude, Michael. I can see him hearing a burglar, walking in on him all indignantlike, saying, 'And just

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what do you think you're doing in my house?' He was like that. Talked like that, too."

"Anybody you know would kill him?"

"You mean, like if it wasn't a burglar?"

"Right."

"I don't know. I mean, Michael was obnoxious, but would it be worth the heat to do him? I don't know, man."

Edwina Vole worked in an advertising agency on Newbury Street. If the name sounded dowdy, it didn't fit the image the woman projected.

She stood to greet me in an office decorated in tubular chrome and glass. Perhaps five-seven, she had long, pianist fingers and long, lacquered nails. Her hair was done up in a bun, a few wisps casually but I thought intentionally escaping to tickle her ears. I pegged her at twenty-six, the newer model a guy like Steinberg might have ordered, given the mileage he'd put on Wendy.

"Mr. Cuddy, I'm afraid I don't know quite what this is about."

Her accent was delightful, the kind the Upstairs people used on the Downstairs people on Masterpiece Theatre. "It's about what I told your receptionist. Michael Steinberg."

"I *was* acquainted with a Michael Steinberg, actually, but he passed away recently."

"Rather suddenly and violently, actually."

Vole stopped, her lips drawing back into anything but a smile. Not a fan of parody, I suppose.

"What do you want, Mr. Cuddy?"

"Let's save some time, Ms. Vole. Your name came up as the deceased's lover. I'd like to ask you some questions. I'm just a private investigator, but the police may be seeing you shortly, if they haven't already."

"They have. Why on earth should I talk to you as well?"

"If you've nothing to hide, why shouldn't you?"

She arched back in the chair. Somehow it didn't look comfortable enough to be worth the trouble.

Vole said, "It's about that lawsuit, am I right? The one Michael's sister filed against Wendy."

"Yes."

"Well, since they both despised him, I don't really care which of them prevails."

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"You seem to be the only person I've met who liked brother Michael."

"Michael was a difficult man to like. Exciting, stimulating in certain ways, but likable? No."

"Then why were you seeing him?"

"He was smashing in bed."

When I didn't reply, she studied me and smiled. Sort of. "Why, detective, I believe you're blushing. Rather an unusual trait in a man these days. Fascinating, actually."

"You have any other interest in Michael?"

She shook her head. "No, my interest was only physical, Mr. Cuddy. And, I might add, Michael's only interest in me was physical. Michael was in marvelous physical condition, the kind you'd expect to live forever. He also was a man of substantial appetite, if I can phrase it that way without making you blush again. I gathered Wendy was not the most attentive appreciator of his charms in that regard. I was simply an outlet for him, though I expect the time we spent together encouraged him to file for divorce."

"So he could marry you?"

"Marry—me? Hah, that would be a good one. No, I'm afraid my dear father would disown me if I were to marry a—someone like Michael. We aren't quite as religiously flexible in England as you seem to be over here."

I stood. Vole tapped the eraser of a pencil against her teeth and said, "By the way, you wouldn't happen to be Anglican yourself, would you?"

Since I was so close to home, I decided to go there instead of back to the office. The little green message light on my telephone tape-machine glowed a fluorescent "1."

As I rewound and replayed, a familiar voice said, "Cuddy, this is Craig Abbot. We settled the case against Wendy this afternoon, so we won't be needing your services after all. Please simply send us a bill through this evening, and call my secretary if you have any questions."

I lay down for a while, thinking about it. Then I dressed in a tattered chamois shirt and a pair of stained, torn khaki pants. The bottom of the closet yielded a crumpled Red Sox cap. In the kitchen, I put a quart of orange juice in a brown paper bag, then folded down the top of the bag so I could drink from it without anyone seeing what was inside.

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Wendy Steinberg's apartment on Commonwealth was just around the corner and down a block. I chose a bench on the center boulevard of Commonwealth across from and slightly out-of-town from her building's front door. I splayed my legs in front of me, wrapping my free hand around the slat at shoulder level and sipping occasionally from my bag. Two dozen people walked by, always giving me a wide berth and finding some aspect of a car or bush to stare at.

At nine-fifteen, following a fashionably late dinner somewhere, the two of them came strolling down the street arm in arm. He politely held her handbag while she fished around for her key. Then I watched Craig Abbot and Wendy Steinberg enter the building.

A minute later, a light flashed on in the bedroom window of one of the apartments, but it didn't stay lit very long.

Craig Abbot's secretary led me into his office and left, closing the door behind her.

"Cuddy, I'm a bit pressed this morning, so I can give you only a few minutes."

"It won't take much longer than that."

"If you need your fee immediately, I could have my secretary draw a check, but—"

"It's not the money I'm here about."

Abbot heard something in my voice and settled back in his chair. "Go ahead."

"First, I should have realized there was something funny about you hiring me."

"Funny?"

"Yeah. Why go three hundred a day on an investigator for a case as clearly groundless as the one Lissa had on Wendy?"

"As I said, I wanted—"

"You wanted me to prove Wendy was innocent. But not because you thought you needed help defending the lawsuit. You could win the case so long as Lissa couldn't prove Wendy'd done anything. You wanted something more than that."

"Such as?"

"Such as proof that the woman you were falling for hadn't killed her husband."

Abbot started to say something, then wet his lips instead. Finally he said, "You don't know what you're saying."

"I was camped on a bench outside Wendy Steinberg's apartment

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last night around nine-twenty. Care to guess what I would have seen?"

Abbot folded his arms and kicked his chair back a foot. "My private life is—"

"I don't want to know about your private life, okay? I'm just here to say my piece, then I'll leave and you won't hear from me again unless you decide you want this in writing."

"Why don't you just say it, then? And quickly, please."

"All right. I see you falling for Wendy when she comes in as a divorce client. It happens. You don't predict much of a return on the divorce because of the ante-nuptial agreement, but you do fine through your practice, so you can stand that. Wendy, however, can't. And I'm guessing Lissa couldn't, either. Those two were good friends—best friends according to Wendy's brother. I think they both saw what they stood to gain from Michael's will as opposed to his continuing good health, and I think they killed him."

"Preposterous."

"Think about it. They both have motive. Wendy for his catting around, Lissa for her parents preferring Michael over her on the family house. The trick is to do it right. Wendy sits at her place in Boston while Lissa drives to Beacon Harbor. Lissa is dressed like a man in an outfit she probably designed for that purpose, with broadened shoulders to make her look less female just in case somebody who knows her walks by. She rings the bell, Michael lets her in, maybe saying, 'What the hell are you decked out for?' Lissa leads him into the dining room, shoots him, then kicks in a french door, stomps around the garden, and yanks out a couple of silver drawers, all to make it look authentic.

"Then she calls Wendy, at eight fifty-one P.M., leaving the connection made and the phone dangling. She gets out of the house, drives a distance away, and pulls off the costume. Dressed normally, she waits half an hour, then roars back to Beacon Harbor to play the distraught sister at the murder scene. When asked, Wendy and Lissa give separate, consistent accounts of the contrived telephone call."

"Nonsense. If what you say really happened, why would Lissa *sue* Wendy?"

"That's the nice touch here, counselor. They've got to see themselves as the police will, prime suspects. So, for appearances' sake, they break off the friendship on the surface and go at it in a lawsuit,

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with each impliedly and defiantly providing an alibi for the other on the night of the murder."

"But that would be stupid, Cuddy. The lawsuit would bring out what they wanted to hide."

"No. Look at who they retained."

Abbot came forward. I cut him off.

"Lissa thinks she has a case against Wendy, but the only way that flies, given the timing of the phone calls, is if Wendy's in it with a confederate. Does Lissa pledge her half of Michael's estate to hire a big firm, or at least a bright solo, to avenge her brother's memory? She does not. She brings in a hack like Treacy, probably at a low hourly rate. Does Wendy hire a specialist in criminal law or fraud to defend her? She does not. She taps a divorce attorney she knows can be controlled because of his feeling for her."

"You can't believe this."

"I do believe it. Let me ask you something. Did Wendy hire you on a contingency basis, like for a third of whatever she gets, or are you per hour?"

Abbot rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Per hour. But that was just a continuation of our prior fee arrangement on the divorce."

"No, Mr. Abbot. That was so she and Lissa could stay in charge, could settle this thing early on without windfall fees to the lawyers if the first hint of outside trouble arose. Tell me, did each woman just say quits and go home with her respective half of Michael's estate intact?"

Abbot looked at me like a child whose puppy just died. "Those are the parameters of the settlement."

"At her deposition, Wendy feeds me her brother and her husband's lover. Why? To keep me occupied for a while on people she knows can't help me. Then you achieve settlements yesterday afternoon when your client a few hours earlier found out that you'd hired an investigator, an 'experienced criminal investigator,' I think you told her?"

Abbot said, "I'd like to be alone for a while."

"Just one last thing."

"You're going to the police."

"No, I'm not. And neither are you. You're bound by the attorney-client privilege, and I'm bound to you, either by the privilege or my licensing statute."

"Then what's the last thing?"

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"You'd think about it eventually, if you haven't already. Why did Wendy take up with you? Romantically, I mean."

Abbot just shook his head.

I said, "Here are three possibilities. One, maybe I'm dead wrong about Wendy and Lissa. Maybe it did happen the way they say it did, panicked burglar and all. Two, maybe Wendy and Lissa are more than good friends and you're just a convenient, temporary cover for their own affair."

"God."

"Three, maybe Wendy and Lissa figure they stumbled onto a magic formula with Michael. One they can repeat with you and your estate."

Abbot slammed the flat of his hand on his desk, making his pen set jump. "Damn it, Cuddy, I'm in love with the woman! What am I supposed to do, stop seeing her?"

I got up to leave. "Either that, or from now on sleep with one eye open."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

IT COULD HAPPEN

by JOHN LARGE

I wrote a very chilling tale,
But now I must decry it—
Although it's packed with rare suspense,
No editor would buy it.
This yarn's about a murder foul—
I shivered as I spun it—
But at the finish, even I
Can't tell for sure whodunit.

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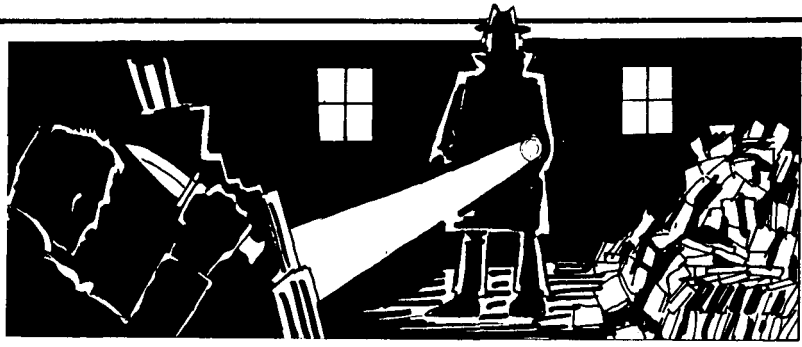

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Only Bill was still in Leeds that summer. His father lost his job on the brewery lorry two months before, and his mother was working part-time in the local baker's shop to supplement the dole. No holiday or even day trip for the Flacks that year. His father was short-tempered and bored out of his mind. His mother was harassed. Bill went to the canal quite a lot with his rod and line to escape the pressures of the family home. If you were going to be lonely, fishing was a nice thing to be lonely doing . . .

DIVINE ANGER

by ROBERT BARNARD

"I say, it isn't, is it? —It couldn't be. —Jessey? —Antony Jessey?" Bill Flack had turned round as he finished signing the hotel register and had begun to reach down for his suitcase when there was this face, this face from his past. Older, much older, but a face vividly remembered. For Bill had a memory for faces, quite apart from particular reasons for remembering.

The man smiled back at him uncertainly.

"I don't quite— Wait a minute. Flack! Good Lord! Was it Jim? Jim Flack?"

"Bill. Well, well, well. What brings you here? You can't be part of the conference, surely? It must be—what?—twenty-five years since—"

But it seemed like only yesterday. That succession of long hot days in the summer of 'sixty-four. His friends around the council estate all seemed to be away: a week in Blackpool, day trips to Scarborough or "Brid," even one—greatly daring—on a family holiday in Marbella. Only he, Bill Flack, still in Leeds. His father had

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lost his job on the brewery lorry two months before, and his mother was working part-time in the local baker's shop to supplement the dole. No holiday or even day trip for the Flacks that year. His father was short-tempered and bored out of his mind. His mother was harassed.

They had met by the canal. Bill went there quite a lot with his rod and line to escape from the pressures of the family home. If you were going to be lonely, fishing was a nice thing to be lonely doing. There were quite a few, young and old, dotted along the canal bank, but they seldom swapped more than a few words. Yorkshire fishermen were among the dourest of a dour breed. Antony had been out walking and had stopped behind him, looking over his shoulder. Bill had registered that they were of an age, about fifteen, and that Antony was very much better dressed than he. Such things were conspicuous at Bill's grammar school. He had smiled briefly at the stranger and gone back to watching his line.

"Do you catch anything much?"

The voice was conspicuously well bred, with not a trace of Yorkshire or Leeds in it. It was friendly, however, and unpatronizing. Bill shrugged.

"Sometimes."

"I mean, big enough to eat?"

"Now and then. Mostly it's tiddlers, stuff for the cat. —Like to sit and hold it?"

Antony nodded. He sat there holding the rod in a wonderfully steady hand. Bill crouched on his haunches on the canal path beside him and they talked—hesitantly, conscious of a gap between them at first, but still they talked.

Antony had just come back from a family holiday in Austria. He had been rather bored. He lived in a large Victorian house two minutes from Bill's council estate. He had no friends in the area because he went to a boarding school in Derbyshire. "Massingham. It's not a *public* school. It's no great shakes," he explained apologetically. "I wouldn't board there if I had the choice. Where do you go?"

Bill jerked his head toward the grammar school on the hill above them. "It's not bad. At least I live at home. Though me dad's out of work and everybody's a bit—tensed up."

Antony nodded as if he understood. Bill wondered if he did. Then the line jerked, and Bill helped him land a fish—not a large one,

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but something bigger than a tiddler. Antony smiled at him, obviously pleased.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" he asked before he walked on, and Bill nodded.

It was after the second day of their acquaintanceship that they walked home together via Antony's house. They were talking and it just seemed to happen that way. Bill knew the houses, of course, but they had always seemed to him something remote, something other. They stood outside the front gate and Bill tried not to stare: a stone house, with an impressive bay, and three stories. What did they do with all that space, Bill wondered.

"Will you come in?" Antony asked politely. Bill shook his head.

"Me mam will be back from the shop," he said obscurely. As he walked away he felt he had been boorish, and he turned and shouted: "See you tomorrow!"

After four or five sessions Antony thought he was getting the hang of fishing. It was a pleasant activity, but not all-absorbing. He tried again.

"Why don't you come round to our house tomorrow?" he asked. "There's a lot of space at the back. I'm practicing bowling."

Cricket was of absorbing interest to Bill. He hesitated only for a fraction of a second before nodding.

He went round next afternoon about two. Mrs. Jessey was on her way out, to a meeting of a charity committee. From a vantage point of twenty-five years later, Bill could characterize her as "early Oxfam." She was pleasant, uncondescending, but dauntingly well dressed.

"There's some buttered scones on the kitchen table," she said, putting on her hat in front of the hall mirror. "They're homemade, and not bad."

Bill could not envisage her flushed from cooking in the kitchen, as his mother always was. Perhaps she had a woman in to do it. The boys went through to the back garden—a large rectangular lawn bordered by roses, hydrangeas, and shrubs Bill did not know the names of. There were stumps set up at the far end, and a bat lying on the grass.

"It seems funny not to be in white," said Antony, taking up the ball. "Will you bat?"

It didn't seem funny at all to Bill not to be in white. But he enjoyed the practice. Antony was a formidably good bowler, but he himself

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was no mean bat. Sometimes he had to be very careful not to hit out. He was afraid of breaking a window in that gracious house. When they swapped round, Antony proved as incompetent with the bat as Bill was with the ball. They gave up, laughing. As they were going back into the house through the back door, Bill caught sight of a gleaming new racing bike leaning against the side of the house. Antony saw him looking, but said nothing about it. He was suddenly embarrassed by his possessions.

When they had collected the scones and a bottle of Coca-Cola, they went up to Antony's room—that was one use of a three-story house, thought Bill—and they said nothing about the mass of prestigious toys, games, and gear scattered around the large Victorian bedroom: the table football, the new rugby boots, the electric train set, the roller-skates and ordinary skates, the snorkel set. They sat and talked, with a new sort of awkwardness—talked about the forthcoming General Election, about schoolwork, what they liked and didn't like, what they would do at GCE and whether they would stay on afterward. When they were finished with the scones, Bill thought it was silly not to mention anything in the room, so he asked about the table football.

"I haven't played much," said Antony, with a shrug of indifference, but getting up to demonstrate. "It was a silly present, really, because all my friends are at school, not around here. You go down that end—"

They played, but their hearts weren't in it. Afterward, Antony asked casually if Bill could roller-skate. Bill had never tried, but they compared feet and found them much of a size, and they went down to the paved path and tarmac square in front of the garage and Antony taught Bill. That was more fun, even though it did involve a lot of falling down.

"There's a rink out at Meeston," said Antony. "You can rent the skates." He nearly added: "It's quite cheap," but saved himself in time.

They were standing by the back door, and Bill began getting ready to go home. "Mam likes us all to be home for tea when she gets back from work," he explained. "She's got a lot to do."

Antony nodded, oddly awkward again.

"Will your father get a job soon?" he asked.

"I suppose so. He's lost jobs in the past and always found one again."

"There's plenty of jobs around," agreed Antony.

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Why something should have snapped in Bill at that, he himself never knew. Something quite irrational, some divine anger, caught hold of him and he swung round.

"You mean there's plenty of jobs of the sort my dad can do, don't you?"

"No! No—of course I didn't!"

"You mean there's plenty of laboring jobs that a working-class thicky like him can pick up—"

"I don't! I don't know your dad!"

"I've had you up to *here* with your cricket whites and your skates and your—"

The wave of rage and frustration overwhelmed him, and he threw himself on the boy, pummeling his head, banging it against the wall, and kicking him with a vicious desperation. Then he ran, choking with rage and self-disgust, out of the gate and down the leafy road toward his home.

Later a policeman called round. Knowing the sort of people the Jesseys probably were, he had guessed that was what would happen. They would prefer to deal through the police. When the constable was led into the front room, Bill was flushed and bitterly ashamed. He burst into tears, and all he could say through his sobs was: "He was so bloody *tactful!*" It sounded silly even to himself. The policeman was avuncular and thought he understood the problem, and he made Bill promise he would write Antony a letter of apology, which he did—a stilted, schoolboyish letter through which there showed a genuine shame.

Now they were standing, still awkward together, in the foyer of the Royal Hotel, Scarborough.

"Well, well, well," said Bill, who could not rid himself of a slight feeling that this was an unlucky meeting. "Are you really with the conference? I had no idea you were in computers."

"I wasn't until three or four years ago. I'm a latecomer—like most."

"That's right. I was immensely lucky being in on the ground floor. I say: I've just had an idea. Are you going to the president's shindig tonight?"

"Well, I had thought to—"

"Give it a miss. They're always deadly, and the current president's got about as much savoir faire as a groundhog. Come and have a sherry in my room, and then we can forage for dinner somewhere or other. My wife's off out—she's up there changing now. She has

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a school reunion, by an odd coincidence. I married a Yorkshire lass, in a way, you see."

The would-be homely phrase came out unnaturally. Somehow it seemed they would never be at ease with each other. Antony wished he could refuse the invitation, but the burden of those days so many years ago sat heavy on him.

"That would be very pleasant," he said.

"Right. It's Room 407. Say in an hour's time? We've got a lot to make up for."

He had meant to say, "We've got a lot of time to make up," but that wasn't how it had come out.

Room 407, when Antony went there a tactful five minutes late, was in reality a suite. All the hotel was splendid, in a post-Regency way, but this suite must have been one of the best there. The furniture was repro-stately-home, and there were original pictures by local artists on the walls. Bill's wife was called Penny: she was beautiful, friendly, and on her way out.

"So nice to meet one of Bill's old friends," she said, a bit breathless. "We don't get to Leeds any more since Bill's parents died— It *is* going to be an evening of school reminiscences, isn't it?"

So Bill had not told her the situation.

"Drink?"

Bill went over to a side table, on which stood a large array of bottles supplied by the hotel.

"Golly, what a choice! You must be expecting to entertain."

"Oh—you know: competitors and customers. Now that I'm vice-chairman, it goes with the job. And you never know: Penny may come back with some old school pals. Though I don't think so: it was one of those rigid, authoritarian private schools that aroused either devotion or aversion. In Penny's case, it was rather the latter. It was only the coincidence of our being here anyway that persuaded her to go to the reunion. Now, what'll it be?"

"A dry sherry would be fine."

"We educate our kids locally," continued Bill, pouring. "I mean locally in London. Penny is a Hampshire girl, and she hated being away from home—as you did, I seem to remember. Luckily we're not starved for choice of schools, and we picked good ones for ours. A good cricketing school for the boys," he added, smiling as he handed over the drink.

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Antony smiled, a little more relaxed. "I still support Yorkshire," he said. "Though it's not the team it was."

"You can say that again!" Bill sat down on the sofa and gave his full attention to his guest. "Well, how come we've never met before at these jamborees? I've been coming—heavens!—seventeen years. Ever since I joined English Electronics."

So he was vice-chairman of English Electronics—a very large, prosperous, prestigious firm in the computer world. It was a job in a million, and no doubt paid accordingly.

"Oh— I'm a Johnny-come-lately in the business," said Antony deprecatingly. "I'm only here because my boss went down with flu. I'm mightily impressed by your job. No doubt I've seen your name often enough and never—made the connection."

"Some things are best pushed to the back of the mind." Bill smiled, feeling less awkward now that it was out in the open. "God! What a fool I was. The sooner you forgot about *that* the better. As for the job, I was lucky. I had a few years with ICI after university, then I decided that I'd rather be a larger fish in a smaller pond. I was in on the ground floor with English Electronics, so I had a head start."

"And now you're a big fish in a big pond."

"As it's turned out," agreed Bill.

"I've always wished I'd gone to university," said Antony.

"Didn't you?".

"I had a place," said Antony bleakly. "At Oxford. Then my dad fell ill. Parkinson's Disease. Of course it was the beginning of the end for him, though it took a long, long while. He wanted me to take over the business."

"I don't think you ever told me what your dad did," said Bill apologetically.

"A chain of electrical shops in Leeds and Bradford. Quite a nice little concern—I got a reasonable sum for it when I sold up."

"Oh—you made me a pile and moved on, did you?"

"Well, not a pile. Business hadn't been all that wonderful. I hadn't my dad's flair, or authority. And then there was a divorce settlement that took a lot of it."

Bill looked down into his glass. "Oh, I was wondering whether you were married. I *am* sorry. Though these days, it's so common, you have to think to count up the marriages that *have* survived. I'm just grateful that Penny can stand the pace and stand the life. Benign neglect—that's what she describes our married life as. I'm going to retire early and make it up to her."

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Antony smiled uncertainly.

"It wasn't really like that with us." He stood up and began walking round the sitting room of Bill's suite. "Anthea wasn't neglected—I was never that involved with my work. I think the marriage died of boredom. There were no children, you see. We did both want children. Failing that, I think Anthea would have settled for an exciting life, or a glamorous one, even. But that's not really Leeds, is it? She filled her life in various ways—took over some of Mother's charity work, that sort of thing, but it didn't help with her own—emptiness, her own hunger. In the end, the marriage just fell apart. She moved out. We run into each other now and then, meet for dinner. We've even talked of going on holiday together again. But we find we haven't got anything much to say to each other."

His voice faded into silence.

"I'm sorry," said Bill again.

"At least I have the job."

"That's right," said Bill heartily. "That gives you an interest."

"It fills in the time, anyway. I think if I had my time over I'd do something entirely different. History, for example. I dabble in local history, but I haven't really got the method. —I do a lot of reading, too."

"I just don't seem to have the time for reading," said Bill, and then regretted it.

"Of course you wouldn't. Take a nice fat book with you when you go on holiday—I imagine that's about it with you, isn't it?"

Bill smiled, all the old awkwardness back, and nodded.

"That's natural, with your work, and your family. But I read a lot. It fills in the time, and keeps the mind occupied. I sometimes feel I'm in danger of letting my mind go a complete blank and staying that way. Luckily, I don't much like television. That really *would* be giving up." He was still walking restlessly about the room.

"Haven't you got enough money from the sale of the firm to make a fresh start?" Bill asked. "Do something you really want to do?"

There was silence. When Antony's voice started again it was clear that he hadn't heard. The voice was somehow disembodied, like the voice of a penitent reaching a priest in the confessional.

"They gave me the job out of charity, of course. I suppose you guessed that. I had plenty of contacts, so when things fell apart Airedale Electronics turned up trumps. They're a small firm, but I do my best for them. I wish my heart was in it. I have a small

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bungalow in Guiseley. No point in anything bigger. I do for myself—cook, clean, all that."

Bill wondered whether to say again that he was sorry. He thought not, but could think of nothing else to say.

"My life is empty!"

The bitterness cut through the stale air of the room. It was a cry of pain. Bill shifted in his seat. Something had to be said.

"I think I know how you feel, old chap." He looked around the room, his suite. "I think, you know, you feel something like I did when—"

He didn't finish. He felt the force of the man as he threw himself at the sofa, felt the hands around his neck. The thought flashed through his mind that justice demanded he make no resistance. The hands circled his throat—strong, bowler's hands, he remembered—and then they squeezed tighter and tighter. Bill's last thought before the darkness engulfed him was how to suggest, tactfully, that honors were now even.

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WILLIAM BANKIER

"Don't come in here any more," Rex Tremayne told Lew Maynard.

"You could lose your license, barring somebody without cause," said Maynard.

"You *could lose your teeth."*

Maynard drank up and went outside. He headed into the Farmer's Market and picked up a coffee and a sausage roll. The confrontation with Tremayne had left him feeling sick with himself. He was younger than the publican and approximately the same size. He had two hands which, when closed, became fists. Yet in the face of the other man's contemptuous dismissal, all Maynard could do was cite legalities . . .

THE COWARD HE'D ALWAYS BEEN

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The hotel lobby was quiet. The switchboard had scarcely bothered him all evening and Maynard's mind was drifting. It carried him back to the Chelsea Farmer's Market on that Saturday afternoon two years ago. He began to put himself through it again.

Seated alone at a patio table, he had noticed a bearded man coming down the stairs from the washrooms above the seafood restaurant. The man looked wrong. He was moving too slowly and there was an animal stiffness about him—back in Montreal, Maynard had once owned a cat who approached other cats this way. The man took out a gun, drew it from his pocket, and held it against his trouser leg, almost invisible.

Maynard made the instinctive move, not unlike the one he had

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made as a boy back in Baytown when the police arrived at the haunted house and he abandoned his friends to save himself. He got up from his table and left the market by the shortest route. Across the patio, through the gateway, into the park with its broken benches, and he was gone onto the King's Road. From there he'd heard the gunfire. Four people died, two were wounded. By the time the police arrived, the gunman was holding hostages. An hour later, he let them go and, having killed enough to close all doors, he killed himself.

The only one Maynard told about his flight was Annie McIntosh. She was his best friend in London. Their relationship was in limbo these days, frozen by the emergence of Rex Tremayne. Six months ago, Tremayne bought the pub she worked in, so he was now Annie's boss. And a little bit more.

Annie's response to his news about the massacre took Maynard by surprise. It touched his buried guilt from the haunted-house episode. "Why didn't you yell?" she wanted to know. "Even birds warn the flock."

"I wasn't sure he was dangerous."

"Then it would have been a false alarm." Her disapproval cut like a knife. "Those people might be alive today."

When line one buzzed, Maynard picked up the switchboard handset and pressed the button under the tiny orange light. He said, "Larchmont Hotel, good evening."

"I'd like to make a reservation for my cousin. She'll be arriving from Scotland on Thursday and expects to be in London for about a week." The man's voice sounded familiar.

"We have single rooms with private bath or with shared bathroom." Maynard quoted rates.

"She'd like her own bath. The name is Caswell. Amanda Caswell. My name is Ligget."

"Terry, is that you? This is Lew Maynard."

"I was trying to place that fine Canadian accent." An element of shared embarrassment entered the conversation. The Larchmont was a low-rent establishment on a seedy side street near the wrong end of the King's Road. There was no dignity either in working at the place or in bringing one's cousin there to stay. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Almost a year. It pays the rent," Lew apologized.

They talked a bit about Zack Farnham and his sad demise. Then Ligget said, "Listen, we're about to cast a new series for Radio 3, a

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melodrama called *Light Years*. There's a part in it for a businessman who ought to have a transatlantic voice. Why don't you come to Broadcasting House and read for it—tomorrow morning at eleven?"

Maynard's heart was pounding when he put down the telephone. What a break! He hadn't had a part out of the BBC since the shooting. It was as if Annie's criticism and his loss of self-esteem had ruined his luck. Now here was a new chance, and all because Terry Ligget had decided to book somebody into the Larchmont Hotel.

When his shift ended an hour before midnight, Maynard left the hotel and walked at top speed along the King's Road all the way to The Trafalgar. He couldn't recall the last time there had been good news for him to tell Annie. She had approved of his taking the job as desk clerk because the wages slowed the drain on his savings, but he could tell she wasn't proud of his status. It was all right for Annie McIntosh to be a barmaid. Her pride was in telling people her man played parts for the BBC.

The pub was closed by the time Maynard got there. He followed his familiar route down the alley and entered by the back door, making his way past kegs and stacked cases, then through the musty velvet drapes and into the big room. Rex Tremayne was behind the register, counting cash. The publican saw Maynard and said something across his shoulder to Annie. She looked up from washing glasses as Lew sat on a stool close to her. She dried her hands and pulled a couple of illegal pints, bringing them to a table where he joined her.

"You look all full of yourself," she said.

"I've had some luck." He told her about Ligget's invitation to audition. "I feel like celebrating," he concluded. "Let's go to the Star for tandoori."

"I told Rex I'd go with him up the West End. He wants to play roulette."

"Tell him you've changed your mind." Maynard's confidence was at an unaccustomed high. "You knew me before he came here."

Annie studied Maynard, as if he had on a new hat and she wasn't sure she liked it. Then she called, "Scratch me for tonight, Rex. Lew and I have to go someplace."

The publican folded a stack of banknotes and stuffed them into his breast pocket. "More fool you," he said. Then, mocking him; "No offense, Maynard."

They walked to the Star of India on the Old Brompton Road and

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lucked out with his favorite table. By candlelight, Maynard ordered more food and drink than he could afford. Annie observed his performance with the menu, then she said, "You must believe this part is in the bank."

"Ligget wouldn't invite me in order to reject me."

"What happened? He used to cast you in something nearly every month."

"Getting roles runs in cycles. Unless you're sleeping with somebody important." Maynard had been secretive about his introduction to acting in England. Now he opened up. "I came over here from Montreal bearing a letter from Zack Farnham. Zack and Ligget went to the Royal Academy together. Ligget landed with the Beeb but Farnham emigrated to Canada and became a producer with the CBC. I was in almost everything he worked on. We partied a lot. When I decided to try my luck in London, Zack said he could open Ligget's door."

"So why did Ligget close it on you?"

"This is weird." A new idea had just entered Maynard's mind. "I always believed it had to do with the Farmer's Market massacre. As if running away lowered my self-esteem and Ligget sensed a change in me that made me less attractive as a performer." Two waiters arrived and began covering the table with bowls and platters of steaming food. When they went away, he continued, "But something else happened right about then. Zack Farnham snuffed himself back in Montreal. He overdosed on the stuff he was taking. It's as if Zack was the link between Terry Ligget and me, and once Zack was gone we fell apart."

Annie was involved in the serious business of loading her plate. "Maybe so. But I still think it was my response to the massacre. After what I said, you realized part of you was missing. Ligget quit hiring what was left."

There were several people waiting to go in and audition, but most were women. Of the men, Maynard was the only one who sounded remotely transatlantic. Terry was as good as giving him the role. When his name was called, Lew entered the studio past the heavy double doors. There was the microphone with a high stool and a music stand beside it. There was the script girl with some loose pages in her hand.

Terry Ligget was beaming from behind the control-room glass. He leaned forward and his voice boomed through the talk-back. "Thanks

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for coming, Lew. Mandy has something for you to read. Just give it to me as it feels comfortable for you."

Mandy handed him the script and said, "I'm to be Jessie. You're Arthur."

Once through the page of dialogue took about a minute. Maynard finished the reading feeling the buoyancy that accompanies abandoning yourself for money and approval. The director's voice sounded again. "Brilliant, Lew. It's just what I want. Are you able to start on Thursday?"

"With great pleasure, Terry." Maynard wanted to weep and pledge undying loyalty.

"Mandy will give you a rehearsal schedule."

Carrying the schedule in his pocket, Maynard left Broadcasting House, walked down Regent Street to Piccadilly, and hopped on a 22 bus for Chelsea. He got off near The Trafalgar and went inside looking for Annie. The lunchtime crowd had not yet arrived. The pub was cool and shadowy, tables polished, carpet freshly hoovered. It felt good to walk up to Rex Tremayne and order a pint.

"Where's Annie?" he asked as he pocketed his change.

"Had a rough night. I told her she could sleep in."

"She was fine when I took her home from the restaurant."

"Then the situation changed, didn't it."

Maynard had intended to save his good news for Annie McIntosh. But now he wanted to throw something into the smirking face. "I've just come from Broadcasting House. I've landed a part in a new series."

The publican obviously had difficulty swallowing this information. But he retained control by pulling another pint. He shoved it in front of his rival. "One on the house for your triumph."

Tremayne went away. For some time he was occupied at the other end of the bar, scooping shepherd's pie onto plates, ringing up money. When he came back, he said, "Finish drinking that. Then get out and don't come back."

"What for?"

"I don't want you bothering Anne."

"Isn't that her decision? And who the hell is Anne?"

"You wander in the back way after closing time. It isn't right."

"You're jealous of my success."

"Call that success? The pittance you get paid by the BBC? Anne needs better looking after than that."

"We were doing fine before you arrived on the scene."

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"Don't come in here any more."

"You could lose your license, barring somebody without cause."

"*You* could lose your teeth."

Maynard drank up and went outside. He headed into the Farmer's Market and picked up a coffee and a sausage roll. It was his first time at one of the patio tables since the massacre nearly two years ago. The confrontation with Tremayne had left him feeling sick with himself. He was younger than the publican and approximately the same size. He had two hands which, when closed, became fists. Yet in the face of the other man's contemptuous dismissal, all Maynard could do was cite legalities. Now that he was alone, an appropriate response took shape in his mind: "Try putting me out and I'll put you through the mirror."

Maynard was back in Baytown with his brother and the rest of the gang. On a summer afternoon, they were exploring the vacant frame building they called the haunted house. The movie *Psycho* was years away from being made, but Maynard recalled the house now as having been very like the one on the hillside behind the Bates Motel. Somebody had forced a door and the others were now inside but he was hanging back on the steps. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blue uniform approaching down the lane. As if shot from a cannon, he was off the porch, across the lawn, over a low hedge, between houses, down two streets, and inside his own porch, panting, looking back through the screen door.

The gang appeared an hour later, having been taken for a ride downtown to the police station, where they heard a lecture from Chief Greb about the sanctity of private property. Nobody, not even Maynard's brother, criticized him for running away. On the contrary, the others now shared an irreplaceable experience. By choosing not to take part, he had come off the poorer.

A woman sitting at a nearby table got up to leave. As she passed Maynard, she touched the back of his hand. "I know what it's like to grieve," she said.

He was due behind the desk at the Larchmont Hotel. When he got there, the lobby was quiet. Holderness, going off duty, had been busy adding to his list of Undesirables. It was a handwritten catalogue, extending now to a dozen pages, naming those who were unwelcome in the hotel with a brief statement, in red, as to why they were personae non gratae. They were people known only to

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himself—writing down their names apparently gave Holderness satisfaction.

He had on his coat and hat. He stood at Maynard's shoulder, a towering observer, as Lew counted the cash. With the balance agreed, he was free to go. "You had a telephone message. A lady named McIntosh."

As soon as he was alone behind the reception desk, Maynard rang Annie. She said, "I wish you wouldn't go in and mess with Rex when I'm not there. It only makes things difficult for me."

"It was you I went to see. I had good news."

"He told me. You got the part."

All the joy was gone. "I'm busy now. We can talk about it another time."

"You sound angry."

"No, I don't."

"I didn't invite him last night. He happened to drop round after you left."

"And stayed so late you were unable to come to work."

"Lewis," she wailed, "I wish you'd tell me what you want from me."

The switchboard began lighting up, so he was able to get away. After a spate of activity, things went quiet again. Remembering Terry Ligget's cousin, Maynard studied the room tickets and saw the name—Caswell, Amanda—in Number 17. He checked the registration card and saw her name printed neatly. There was no street address, simply the designation, Aberdeen. She had arrived that morning.

At seven, she came down the stairs and put her key on the desk. She took Maynard by surprise—a girl probably in her late teens, dressed and made up older. She had sophisticated eyes, one of which winked at the man behind the counter. "You must be Lew."

"That's right, Ms. Caswell," he said formally. He didn't appreciate her conspiratorial manner.

"If Terry shows," she said, "send him upstairs. Tell him I've gone to get the wine." There was nothing Scottish about her accent. She sounded more American than anything else.

This was a liaison—Maynard could sense the sexual tension. If she was a cousin, she was a distant one. Terry Ligget was a married man with children. The family had appeared together in the control room more than once during broadcasts in past years. To maintain

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secrecy, he had installed his imported woman at this unfashionable address.

But why the moral condemnation? It was, after all, the last decade but one before the turn of another century. If the producer wanted to have it off with a cute young thing, why not? Especially since he was taking care not to embarrass his wife.

They came back into the lobby together, Ligget carrying a bag from the off-license. "You two have met," he said. Not having to perform introductions seemed to take pressure off him. "Can you let me have some ice?"

"I'll tell the porter."

On the stairs, Ligget called back, "You read well today."

And there it was, out in the open, subtle but penetrating. Lew Maynard had been cast in the new series as payment for his discretion. Not that he would have reported the affair to Ligget's wife. But now the bases were covered, everything was buttoned down. He was an accessory to the fact of the broadcaster's infidelity. It made him feel powerless, like a child. He could be the worst actor ever to perform in a BBC studio, but he would never lose this part as long as he kept Ligget's secret.

Maynard spent the quiet hours before eleven o'clock thinking about Annie and Rex Tremayne. They deserved each other. He believed Annie had always liked him to a certain extent. But Rex turned her on. He had money and power. Maynard had been an interesting companion for her, especially when he was on the air frequently, but when he ran out on the developing situation at the Farmer's Market he revealed a spinelessness she could not admire. Now it was humiliating to be hanging around her when Tremayne could walk in at all hours and be made welcome. Better to close down the relationship before Annie asked him to disappear.

When his shift ended, Maynard set out on foot for The Trafalgar, preparing his farewell speech on the way. He would keep it brief. "We don't have anything to offer each other, Annie. Let's agree to call it quits." Maybe he should find himself a sweet young thing, like Ligget's so-called cousin. Age, interpreted as wisdom, could be attractive to the young.

Through the locked front door of the pub, Maynard made out Tremayne and Annie behind the bar. Somebody else was with them. Fine, let the stranger keep Rex occupied while Lew said his piece to Annie. Heading down the lane to the back entrance, he decided

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to draw her to one side, make his declaration of independence, and cruise on out of there.

The back door swung open at his touch. There was just enough light for him to make his way between the stacked cases. He loved the smell in here—the whiff of beer, the tang of damp concrete. His hand was on the heavy drape, he was about to pass on through, when he heard Annie's voice. A note of panic stopped him.

"Rex, give him what he wants. It isn't worth getting killed."

"She's right." The stranger sounded tense.

"Like hell. I work hard, I'm not handing over my money."

"You think I'm joking?" A shot rang out, glass shattered.

Maynard's heart nearly beat a hole in his chest. He wanted to run. He could escape, nobody knew he was here. But Annie was in there! What could he do?

He turned and looked for a weapon. There was a wooden mallet. Tremayne did something with it when he was opening barrels. But what good would it be against a pistol?

Maynard moved silently back outside. There were garbage cans beside the doorway. He crouched behind them.

Time passed. Was Tremayne handing over the money? Rex was bloody-minded, he might be taking the robber on. But there was no sound of a struggle.

Then, something was happening in the storeroom. Cases crashed to the floor. The stranger was on his way out, running. Maynard lost his balance. He fell sideways against one of the cans and had to stand erect to keep from going over.

The man came through the doorway and ran straight into Maynard in the darkness. They fell to the cobbled pavement, grappling face to face. Maynard's fear exploded inside him and became something else. A monster was on top of him and he had to kill it. With both hands, he tore at its face. There was screaming, some of it surely his own. He could smell the skin, the hair, the breath. He sank his teeth into a wrist and held on like a dog. Now his fingers had hold of the man's throat, his thumbs pressing down hard.

Somebody had him by the shoulders and he was being dragged upward. "Lew! Stop it! Let go!" It was Annie's voice. A flashlight beam cut across the body on the pavement. Rex Tremayne sounded respectful. "You're a dark horse, Maynard. Another minute and you'd have killed that poor bloke."

Amanda Caswell was in the control room with Ligget when May-

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nard arrived in the studio. That took nerve. Not that Mrs. Ligget would be liable to show up with the kids.

Maynard spent some time getting to know his fellow actors and had to explain his bandaged hand.

"Will it be awkward, turning pages in your script?" This was Ligget himself, down in the studio to get the rehearsal organized.

"It's no problem," Maynard said. He had decided to dismiss the injury in as few words as possible. "I strained a ligament twisting a lid off a jar."

The half-hour episode of *Light Years* was recorded later in the afternoon, then everybody went down the street to Ligget's club for drinks. Ligget's cousin was at his side throughout. One of the performers whispered in Maynard's ears, "Our peerless leader has scored a coup with that one."

Amanda Caswell encountered Maynard at the bar. "Thanks for your discretion," she said. "I'll be going home tomorrow."

"To Scotland?" he said, giving her back the wink she had bestowed on him over the hotel desk.

"You saw through that. No, New York. Terry's finished introducing me to his backers. They've approved me for the lead in the film he wants to make. I'm not supposed to be in England. If word got back to certain people producing the play I'm about to do off Broadway—"

"You're an actress?"

"I thought you knew. If it had been leaked that I'm slated for Terry's project, there could have been complications with my contract."

As Maynard left the club, Ligget saw him out the door. "You were superb today. See you next Thursday. And thanks for keeping my secret."

It was raining lightly. Maynard felt it on his face like spray. Half drunk, he imagined himself on a dark ocean at the helm of a sturdy ship. It was Annie's night off. She might be home. Ordinarily he would have telephoned. Tonight, he decided to drop in unannounced. If Rex Tremayne was there or if he should drop in later, Maynard would tell him to get out before he took hold of him and threw him down the stairs.

Annie was alone. "How's your hand?" she asked him. He told her he was feeling no pain. "I can see that," she said. "Take a look at the envelope on the dresser."

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He opened the long brown envelope and found a sheaf of twenties. He counted five hundred pounds. "Do I have to ask where this came from?"

"It's from Rex. That's about a quarter of what the robber was carrying when you stopped him."

He didn't want to accept anything from the publican. But the money would certainly come in handy. If he could put it away and add his acting fees to it, someday they might have the downpayment on a house. Annie would still have to work—but not for Rex Tremayne.

Maynard wavered. Finally he tucked the envelope into his pocket and went to where she was sitting on the end of the bed, looking unsure of herself. "I'm worth a lot more than this," he said.

For the first time in years, he was almost ready to believe it. He put his arm around her. And then, in a whisper, he began confessing to her that his interception of the robber had been an accident, that he was the coward he had always been, that he would never change.

"You've changed so much," she said, "I hardly know you."

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Information gathered by Ellery Queen for his 1971 collection of stories by Edward D. Hoch, The Spy and the Thief: *Nick Velvet was born Nicholas Velvetta March 24, 1932, of Italian parents in Greenwich Village, New York City. His father was active in local politics. Nick shortened his surname to Velvet before dropping out of high school, joining the Army, and serving in Korea. Following discharge, he took night courses to complete his high-school education while working days at a marina. After trying a number of jobs, Nick found he could make a more comfortable living by stealing worthless objects at $20,000 per theft.*

Nick always works alone, though he occasionally hires someone to divert attention or carry out a routine part of his assignment. He remains unmarried, though he has lived for years with Gloria Merchant, who shares his interest in boating. When not on a job, Nick likes to relax with Gloria and a beer on their porch or on a sailboat on Long Island Sound. This latest assignment takes him to the West Coast, to San Francisco, scene of many a felonious fiction . . .

THE THEFT OF THE EMPTY BIRDCAGE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Later Nick Velvet would come to think of it as a mystery that was never fully solved. But in the beginning it seemed quite ordinary.

A long, garishly colored dragon was undulating along Grant Av-

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enue on Nick's first evening in San Francisco, accompanied by the muted crackle of fireworks. He could see it from his hotel room atop Nob Hill, and he wondered what sort of Chinese holiday occurred on October tenth. For a moment he considered walking down to Chinatown to join in the festivities, but decided there wasn't time before his seven-thirty meeting with Baxter Clark. The man had summoned him here for an urgent assignment, to be completed within twenty-four hours.

Baxter Clark was a younger man than Nick had expected, barely out of his twenties. His dark moustache and straight black hair gave him a seductive but slightly sinister appearance, like some film star from decades past. That was the first surprise. The second was his companion, a shy but lovely Chinese girl named Wen Chen who appeared to be no more than twenty.

"From my window I could see the dragon down on Grant Avenue," Nick said as they seated themselves in a remote corner of the nearly deserted cocktail lounge. He'd learned over the years that his clients preferred the initial meeting in a public place rather than in a hotel room that could easily be bugged. "Is it a holiday?"

"Probably some sort of promotion by the merchants," Clark suggested. "They have them all the time."

The drinks came and Nick charged them to his room. "What is it you need?" he asked his client, dispensing with the small talk.

"A birdcage."

Nick considered that. "Is the bird still in it?"

"No. The bird is dead."

"I see. Why do you need it within twenty-four hours?"

"Someone else may be after it."

"What's the difficulty about stealing it?"

"The owner died a few days ago. Her house is sealed by the police until the investigation is complete."

"The owner was murdered?"

"That's right," Baxter Clark admitted.

"Did the bird die at the same time?"

He nodded. "Someone hit the woman on the head and turned on the gas in the kitchen stove. The woman and her bird were both killed. The police removed the bird's body for examination, to confirm the cause of death."

"What was the woman's connection with you?"

"That's unimportant. I want you to steal the birdcage tomorrow and deliver it to me tomorrow evening. I'll pay you the second half

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of your fee on delivery." He took an envelope from an inside pocket. "Here's the first half. You'll find the name and address in there, too."

Nick finished his drink, rose, and shook hands. "You can phone me at my room tomorrow evening. It's been a pleasure to meet you, Miss Chen." The young woman bowed her head but did not respond.

Nick was not surprised when the address in the envelope proved to be on the edge of Chinatown. Baxter Clark would not have had the Chinese girl along unless she figured somehow in the action. Nick hadn't waited until the following morning, but had gone out shortly after his meeting with Clark.

He found the shabby Victorian house, the last on the street, being guarded by a bored-looking policeman. Nick introduced himself, using a pseudonym he'd resorted to in the past. "I'm writing a story on the murder," he explained. "Any chance I could see the inside of the house?"

"Not till the investigation's finished," the cop told him. "That's what I'm here for, to keep people out."

"The dead woman's name was Hilda Teleg?"

"That's right."

"How do you know she didn't turn on the gas and kill herself?"

"Blow on the head. She probably surprised a burglar and he whacked her one with a candlestick. Then he turned on the gas in the kitchen, maybe hoping the house would blow up. When suicides turn on the gas, they usually stay nearby, with their head in the oven or something. This one was in the living room with a bump on her head."

"When could I get a look at the inside?"

"Beats me," the cop said, shifting from one foot to the other. "You'd have to talk to the family, if there is one. I don't think they've found anybody yet. She kept to herself."

"How old was she?"

"Seventy-six, I think. Somewhere around there."

"It must be a boring job, guarding this place."

The cop shrugged. "Somebody's got to do it. The neighborhood kids would tear it apart."

Nick left him and strode down the block to Grant Avenue. He could see the big oriental arch across the street that marked the entrance to Chinatown. Down the block the glowing dragon was still cavorting, its fifty pairs of human legs giving it more the appearance

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of a centipede. Metal dragons writhed on the pagoda-shaped streetlamps, too, reminding the tourists that this was a place apart.

Nick stopped a passing Chinese man. "What's the parade for?" he asked over the din of the fireworks.

"October tenth! Birth of the Chinese Republic!"

"Of course!" Nick wondered why Wen Chen hadn't known that, or been willing to share the information.

He walked a while through the crowds, mostly non-orientals attracted by the festivities. After a time he returned to the Victorian house a few blocks away. The police officer on guard was seated in his patrol car now and Nick couldn't be certain it was the same man he'd spoken with earlier. Perhaps the shift had changed.

It was easy enough to gain access to the old house by way of the back porch, cutting the glass to unlatch a window and raise it silently. He found himself in the kitchen next to the gas stove that had been the cause of the old woman's death. He moved on into the living room, guiding himself with a tiny pocket flashlight, scanning the tables and walls until he spotted the empty birdcage hanging from its stand. It was in the shape of a pagoda.

Suddenly Nick was blinded by the glare of a powerful flashlight that seemed to flood the room. "Freeze, buddy!" a voice growled. "I'm a cop and I've got you covered!"

Nick raised his hands. Then he saw the gun extending out into the light. The man hadn't sounded like a police officer and the weapon didn't look like a standard police revolver. It was an automatic, possibly foreign, certainly not regulation issue in San Francisco. As he saw and comprehended this, he launched his body sideways, trying to escape the light. The automatic coughed once, its sound echoing off the walls, and Nick knew the bullet hadn't missed him by much. He dove behind an overstuffed chair, out of the flashlight's piercing beam, knowing it would offer little protection against a second shot.

"Come out from there or you're a dead man," the bogus cop ordered.

Nick hurled his pocket flashlight across the room, then bounded back into the kitchen the way he'd come. The man cursed and fired again, taking a chunk of plaster from the wall above Nick's head. In a single motion, Nick swung a kitchen chair at one window, shattering it with a force to suggest he'd dived through it. He kept swinging the chair in wide arcs and caught the other man full on the face and chest as he came running through the doorway.

The man was stunned and half unconscious as Nick kicked the

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gun from his hand, sending it spinning across the kitchen floor. Shining the powerful flashlight on him, Nick saw a swarthy face with a police cap and police jacket with a plaid shirt and jeans underneath. He doused the flashlight quickly, hearing voices from outside, and went to the front window.

Another patrol car had drawn up at the curb and two officers had just discovered the unconscious body of their partner. One was trying to revive him while the other drew his revolver and sprinted toward the house. Nick made a grab for the pagoda-shaped birdcage, but it wouldn't come loose from its standard. He tugged at it and tried to examine the attachment in the near-darkness of the room, but was forced to abandon it as the burly cop kicked open the front door. He barely made it out the back window, saved only by the officer's discovery of the stunned man on the kitchen floor.

Tomorrow, Nick promised himself, though he hated to abandon the job this close to success and he knew it was going to be even more difficult to penetrate the house a second time.

The following morning was grey with a heavy mist that hung over the city and obscured the top of the Transamerica Pyramid only a half dozen blocks away. Nick ordered breakfast in his room and then placed a call back home to Gloria. It would be nearly noon there and she'd be waiting to hear from him.

"When will you be home?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, I hope. It's taking a bit longer than I'd planned."

"Problems?"

"Nothing serious."

"What are you after?"

"An empty birdcage."

She laughed. "What will they come up with next."

After breakfast Nick went out for a stroll, heading down the steep sidewalk from his Nob Hill hotel to Chinatown once more. Crews were still cleaning up the litter from the previous night's celebration, and as Nick walked among them he spotted a pair of small unexploded firecrackers near the curb. He scooped them up and dropped them into his pocket, deciding they might come in handy later.

Straightening, he happened to notice the girl, Wen Chen, emerging from a pastry shop across the street. She turned in the other direction without looking his way. Nick decided he wanted to know more about her. He walked across to the pastry shop and went inside.

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A Chinese woman was alone behind the counter. "Pardon me," he said, "I was wondering about that Chinese girl who was just in here."

The woman gave him a puzzled frown. "No Chinese girl here. You have the wrong place."

"I just saw her come out—"

"No Chinese girl."

There seemed no point in pursuing it further. Wen Chen obviously had friends in the Chinese community who were not about to discuss her with strangers. He bought a bag of fortune cookies and left the shop. Halfway up the block, he broke one open and read the printed slip: BEWARE OF A SILENT BIRD.

Well, he decided, the bird that had occupied Hilda Teleg's cage was certainly silent now.

There was nothing in the newspaper about the man who'd assaulted the police guard at the Teleg house, but when Nick walked past the house on the other side of the street he noticed there were now two police officers on duty. He found a telephone and called the number Baxter Clark had given him.

"This is Nick," he said when the man answered.

"Do you have the merchandise?"

"Not yet. I think someone else was after it last night." He described the man he'd encountered in the house.

There was a sigh at the other end of the line. "I think I know who it was. Pay no heed to him. He won't give you any more trouble."

"He was certainly trying last night."

"I'll take care of it," Clark assured him. "Have it for me tonight. I'll wait for your call."

Nick hung up and thought about how he was going to steal the birdcage in broad daylight with two policemen on guard. It didn't take him long to come up with three possibilities, one of them involving the pair of firecrackers in his pocket. He stood at the corner, looking down the street at the house, and was about to start along the block when he noticed a small foreign car parked behind the patrol car. Suddenly the door of Hilda Teleg's house opened and Wen Chen, looking attractive in jeans and a bulky blue sweater, stepped onto the porch, carrying the birdcage in one small hand.

Nick hurried along the sidewalk, hoping to intercept her, but there was no time. She placed the birdcage inside the car, slid behind the steering wheel, and was gone.

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"Who was that Chinese girl?" Nick asked the patrolman lounging in the patrol car.

"What Chinese girl?"

"The one who just came out of the house."

"There was no Chinese girl in there."

Nick felt as if he were going mad. "I just saw her come out with a birdcage! You must have seen her, too."

"Oh, you mean Wen Chen. She's Japanese."

"I thought this was a crime scene. Why was she allowed into the house?"

The officer eyed Nick with distaste. "You a reporter or something? Wen Chen has a pet shop in Japantown. The birdcage belonged to her, so we let her have it, okay?"

"Okay," Nick agreed.

The area known as Japantown was outside the downtown area, off Geary Boulevard in the Western Addition. It clustered mainly around the twenty-year-old Japan Center complex between Geary and Pine, where half a hundred shops sold everything from jewelry and antiques to native food and cookware. There were offices and art galleries and the Japanese consulate was located in the area.

Nick had no trouble finding the pet shop, down the street from the Kokusai movie house, where Japanese films played to enthusiastic audiences. The smiling woman behind the counter reminded him of the Chinese woman in the pastry shop. "Welcome to Orient Pets," she said. "Will it be fish or feathers today? Or perhaps something larger?"

The choices were all around him, from overhead cages emitting chirps to rows of tanks where strange shapes of color swam languidly in peaceful water. He saw a pagoda cage like the one at the Teleg house and went over to it, but this one was different—newer, glossier. "You read about the killing on Vallejo?" the woman said. "Woman had a birdcage just like that one."

"Is that so?" Nick murmured. "Tell me, is the owner around—Miss Wen Chen?"

"I'm the owner. Tamura Wakasa. Wen Chen is my assistant. You want her?"

Nick nodded and the Japanese woman switched on an intercom. "Wen Chen, are you back there?"

Nick heard an affirmative crackle and Wen Chen appeared from

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the back room almost at once. She still wore the jeans and bulky sweater. "What can I do for you?" she asked, betraying no emotion.

"Is there someplace we can talk?"

"In the workroom," she decided. "Come this way."

Nick followed her into a room filled with empty cages and tanks. The pagoda birdcage stood on a table near the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you at work, but it seemed important."

Wen Chen shrugged. "Mrs. Wakasa is used to my visitors. Baxter comes occasionally, and my brother Jiro."

Nick motioned toward the birdcage. "I saw you take it this morning."

"Baxter told me you were having trouble and I decided to do it myself. I told the guard the birdcage was on loan from our shop. As I removed it from the stand, I applied a self-sticking shop label to the bottom. The officer saw that and believed my story. I signed a receipt and walked out with it. I should have tried it earlier, before Baxter went to the trouble of hiring you."

"Then you don't need me any more?"

She smiled sweetly. "We don't need you any more. I did it for free."

"Funny thing, I thought you were Chinese. Isn't Wen Chen a Chinese name?"

"I'm one-quarter Chinese—the rest is Japanese-American. My family has lived here for generations. I'm sometimes mistaken for Chinese by people who don't know me."

"The policeman on guard knew you, and the woman in the pastry shop."

"My, you have been checking up on me."

"Just curious. Tell me about the birdcage. Why is it so valuable to you and Clark?"

Wen Chen rested her arm on a large cage that still had an animal odor about it. "It's valuable to me. Baxter was good enough to help. He knew of your reputation and was willing to advance me the money to pay you. We plan to be married next year."

"And you could have paid it back once the birdcage was in hand?"

She glanced at the pagoda cage a bit uncertainly. "Well, yes. You see, my mother's father was one of the Japanese-Americans forced to leave his home and go to a detention camp during World War Two. He died there in nineteen forty-three. Before he left San Francisco he was said to have amassed a large personal fortune of nearly a million dollars. No one knows what he did with it. My parents

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always believed he converted his holdings into jewelry or gold and hid it somewhere in the city."

"But hardly in Hilda Teleg's birdcage," Nick said.

"Hilda was living here at the time and she knew my grandfather—though of course she was much younger than he was. I think she was around thirty when the war broke out."

"Were they lovers?"

She blushed slightly. "Hilda was my father's grammar-school teacher—that's how Grandfather knew her. He trusted her implicitly, more than his own son. When the family was interned during the war, he's supposed to have told Hilda the whereabouts of his fortune."

"Did you ask her about it?"

"Of course, many times." The subject seemed to animate her. "All she'd ever tell me was to look in the birdcage. 'If anything ever happens to me,' she'd say, 'look in the birdcage.' "

"Where is your father now?" Nick asked.

"Back in Japan. He gave up believing in hidden treasure."

He rested a hand on the cage. "Have you found anything in it yet? A hidden compartment?"

"Nothing. It's quite old, but not unusual in its design."

Nick felt the sturdy wire sides, examined the pagodalike top. The bottom was lined with month-old pages from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Nothing here," he agreed. "Tell me, why didn't you simply wait until the house was unsealed and the police investigation ended? Why bring me in?"

"Baxter was afraid the killer might have learned the location of the money, or at least a clue to its whereabouts. He didn't want to wait. I offered to try for the cage earlier, but he didn't want me in danger with a killer prowling. He wanted to hire you, and it was his money. When you failed, I went there today without telling him."

"Does your employer know you stole it?"

"Mrs. Wakasa? No. I came in the back door so she wouldn't see the cage. She was never at the Teleg house, anyway. Hilda had had her bird long before this shop opened."

Mrs. Wakasa opened the door from the outer shop. "Can you help with the customers?" she asked Wen Chen pointedly.

Another little blush. "I'm sorry," Wen Chen murmured and hurried into the shop with only a brief glance at Nick.

He stood there a moment, eyeing the birdcage, wondering what

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he should do. Finally, knowing he'd probably hate himself for it, he picked up the cage and left the shop by the back door.

Baxter Clark knocked at the door of Nick's hotel room promptly at four o'clock. When Nick reached him on the phone, he'd promised to come at once and complete their business deal. Now his eyes lit up as he entered the room and saw the cage on a table by the window.

"Congratulations," he said, shaking Nick's hand, "I knew you could do it." His black hair was a bit more rumpled than on the previous day.

"If you wish to conclude the deal," Nick told him, "I might try for a late flight back to New York."

Clark had picked up the birdcage and held it to the light. "A bit dirty, but well made."

"Worth my fee?"

"Every penny of it."

"No extra charge for the newspapers in the bottom. That's the way I found it."

Clark reached into his pocket and withdrew a fat envelope. "Are you acting for Wen Chen in this?" Nick asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

"She's not involved. She came along last night merely because she wished to meet the infamous Nick Velvet." He grinned as he said it, but Nick knew he was lying.

"When I wondered about the parade, she never told me it was to celebrate the birth of the Chinese Republic."

"Oh?"

"Maybe that's because she's really Japanese," Nick said as his fingers closed on the envelope in Clark's hand.

The younger man snatched the envelope back in an instant. "What is this? Have you been talking to Wen Chen?"

"A few words only."

"I hope you don't believe—"

"I believe you may be trying to find her grandfather's hidden fortune before she does."

"You know about that, do you?" Clark asked sourly. "I'm trying to help her in every way I can. We're engaged to be married. But frankly I doubt that there ever was a hidden fortune. I'm not one for vague treasure hunts."

"Yet you're willing to pay me for the birdcage."

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"I love the young woman, Mr. Velvet. I'd do anything to make her happy."

"Who is the man who assaulted me last night?"

"A fellow named Katse. He's an Arab or a Turk or something like that. I understand he's a friend of Wen Chen's brother Jiro, who's not too wise in his choice of friends."

"Did the police arrest Katse?"

Clark nodded. "But he's out on bail."

Nick smiled. "It's like something out of *The Maltese Falcon*. But maybe that's to be expected in San Francisco."

Clark frowned. "Hilda Teleg's bird was a parrot, not a falcon."

"What I mean is that everyone's after this valuable birdcage, only it's not valuable at all—just like the statuette in Hammett's novel."

"I see. A literary allusion. But you might be mistaken. Perhaps this cage does have its secrets." Clark crossed to the table and pulled out a shallow tray at the bottom of the cage. "This is how you clean it and change the newspapers. Wen Chen showed me on a similar cage when we were talking in the workroom at the pet shop."

"The newspaper's from last month," Nick told him, reading the date on the top of the page.

"But the paper underneath is older. Look."

It was indeed a portion of a newspaper page dating back nearly three decades. They studied it together. One article dealt with a plan to move an old graveyard to make room for an office building. "That could be what we're looking for," Clark said.

"Perhaps," Nick agreed. The whole thing seemed a bit bizarre to him, but his client was satisfied. Nick accepted the remainder of his fee and watched Baxter Clark leave the hotel room with the birdcage. With a little luck, Nick would be on his way back home before Clark learned that Wen Chen had gotten the birdcage herself and Nick had stolen it from her.

It was barely five minutes later when there was a knock at the door. Nick opened it without thinking, assuming Clark had forgotten something, but instead of Clark he faced the swarthy man who had attacked him at the Teleg house. He was holding his pistol inches from Nick's face. "Back up nice and easy," he snarled. "I'll be just looking for an excuse."

Nick held up his hands. "You've got no argument with me, Katse. That's your name, isn't it?"

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The big man stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "Never mind my name. Where's the birdcage?"

"Flown away," Nick replied. "You're too late."

"Who took it?"

"Jiro Chen."

Katse swung the barrel of the gun, missing Nick's nose by an inch. "Don't play games. Jiro's the one who's looking for it. You stole it from his sister."

"I think it's time Jiro and I had a talk."

"Your talking days are over, Velvet, unless you produce that birdcage."

Nick hesitated. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Let me think about it. Mind if I light up a cigarette?"

Katse thought about it, then nodded, keeping the pistol focused on Nick. "Careful now!"

Nick took a few steps backward to the table by the window, lighting a cigarette from the pack he'd left there and then carefully placing it in the ashtray. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement," he said, walking back toward the bed, Katse's gun following him. "There should be enough in this for everyone."

At that instant the firecracker in the ashtray exploded with a startling noise. Katse whirled to face it and Nick dove for him, knocking him backward to the floor. "Just a little something left over from last night's parade," he explained as he yanked the weapon free of Katse's grasp.

"What do you want?" Katse managed to gasp.

"Get on the phone and call Jiro. Tell him I want to see him."

Wen Chen's brother proved to be a slender man with features very much like hers. He arrived at Nick's hotel room within an hour, barely acknowledging Katse's presence.

"You're Nick Velvet," he said, holding out a bony hand. "My sister has mentioned you."

Nick motioned toward the man seated on the bed. "Your friend here has tried to kill me twice."

"He's not too reliable," Jiro muttered. He spoke a few quick words that Nick didn't understand and the man rose from the bed.

"Where's he going?"

"You and I speak better alone," Jiro said.

Katse paused at the door to look back at Nick. "Can I have my gun?"

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"I'll give it to Jiro when he leaves."

Katse sulked out and Jiro Chen said, "You were hired by Baxter Clark to steal the birdcage."

"There's no point in denying it. Your sister was with him at the time. I got the impression later that he was acting on her behalf."

"He's after the treasure, just as we all are, but he has no right to it. The money belonged to our grandfather."

"Do you really think Hilda Teleg would have kept his secret all these years and not gone after the money herself?"

"You saw how she lived in that house. She had no need of a treasure. Perhaps her greatest joy in life came from guarding my grandfather's secret."

"Who killed her, Jiro? Who turned on the gas?"

He rubbed his hands together. "Does it matter now? I'm sure you've been paid for your work. My sister tells me she simply walked out with the cage in her hand, but you stole it from her. That should be enough. Go back to New York or wherever you came from."

He was right, of course. Nick had his money and it didn't matter to him who had killed the old lady. Still, he didn't feel quite right about going back. Perhaps he was bothered by the manner in which he'd stolen the cage from Wen Chen. She'd trusted him, and she had more right to the cage than Baxter Clark.

When Jiro Chen left, Nick began to pack his bag. Then he decided he owed Wen Chen a phone call at the very least. He dialed the pet shop's number. Mrs. Wakasa answered. "Orient Pets."

"Is Wen Chen there?"

"Just a moment." Nick heard her summon the younger woman on the intercom. "Wen Chen, there's a call for you."

"Hello?" Wen Chen's voice came on.

"This is Nick Velvet."

"Yes."

"I'm flying back East later. I wanted to see you before I go."

"What for?"

"To apologize."

"That isn't necessary, Mr. Velvet. Baxter hired you to steal the birdcage and that's exactly what you did."

"I had a chat with your brother just now."

"Jiro? What about?"

"His friend Katse tried to kill me again." He heard a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. "All right," she said, "I'll meet

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you. There's a fast-food place across the street from the shop here. I'll be there in ten minutes."

He found it without difficulty and slid into the booth across from Wen Chen. She was no longer the shy girl he'd first met in the company of Baxter Clark. Her face was full of some emotion she could barely control, something new and troubling to her. It was starting to get dark, but the pet shop was still lit up. "Do you have to work this evening?" he asked.

She nodded. "We're open until nine tonight."

"Did you send Jiro after me?" he asked quietly.

"Of course not! I told him what happened, but the rest was his own idea."

He studied her face for a moment before he spoke again. "You believe your brother killed Hilda Teleg, don't you?"

"I don't know. That friend of his, Katse, scares me at times."

"If either of them had killed the woman, wouldn't they have stolen the birdcage at the same time? Why wait till later to get it, when the police were watching the house?"

"I can't explain that," she admitted. "But the police have been withdrawn now. They've finished their investigation and ruled it a suicide in spite of everything. Baxter just phoned to tell me. He's coming over to pick me up at the shop at nine."

"Baxter," Nick repeated. "Did he tell you he has the birdcage?"

"Of course, but there's nothing in it."

"There was an old newspaper at the bottom of the cage. It mentioned a graveyard that had to be moved."

"It would have no relation to my grandfather. He was cremated."

"Cremated?"

"It was my father's decision. If there is a treasure, it's certainly not with Grandfather's body."

"And yet Hilda Teleg repeatedly told you, 'If anything ever happens to me, look in the birdcage.' "

"That's what she said," the young woman agreed glumly. "When I see what's happening to Jiro over this, I sometimes wish I'd never met her."

"I have an idea," Nick told her. "It won't find the missing money, but it might help establish your brother's guilt or innocence."

"What is it?"

"When Baxter comes to the shop tonight, tell him you've suddenly

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remembered there was a second birdcage upstairs in the Teleg house."

"But there wasn't."

"Just say it. I'll explain later."

It was after ten o'clock when Nick found himself hiding in a closet on the second floor of the Teleg house. The dead teacher's clothes still hung there and Nick could detect an unpleasant mustiness even though she'd been dead less than a week. He realized this all might be for nothing and that finding a second birdcage would be no proof of murder. Still, he felt it was something he owed Wen Chen.

For the first hour nothing happened.

He heard a bedroom clock beep softly at eleven, and was just about deciding he'd been wasting his time when he heard the squeak of floorboards on the stairs.

He heard another door open, and then close. Then the bedroom door opened and he saw the beam of a flashlight cut through the darkness for just an instant. Knowing the intruder had spotted the golden birdcage near the window, Nick waited until the figure was outlined by the dim light from outside, then threw open the closet door and shot a beam from his own flashlight. "I'm sorry to confuse you, Mrs. Wakasa," he said, "but that's my birdcage."

The owner of Orient Pets turned on him in a fury. He had to pin her arms to her sides and hold her until the others got there.

Later, when the police had been summoned, Baxter Clark told Nick, "She's ready to confess to the murder. There won't be any problem over lack of evidence."

"What made you suspect her?" Wen Chen asked Nick.

"Very little, really. This morning when I went to the shop for the first time, Mrs. Wakasa knew what sort of cage was in the Teleg house. I thought nothing of it at the time, but later you told me she'd never seen the cage or been inside the house.

"I still needed something to connect her with the search for your grandfather's money, though. It seemed unlikely that Baxter or Jiro would have cut her in for a share. Then I phoned you before we met at the fast-food place and I heard Mrs. Wakasa summon you on the intercom. I remembered she'd done the same thing this morning. There was an open line between the front room of Orient Pets and the rear workroom where you held your conversations with Baxter—and probably with Jiro as well. By simply pushing a button,

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Mrs. Wakasa could have heard your entire conversations. I think she became intrigued with some mention of your grandfather's hidden treasure and decided to find it herself. She overheard some mention that Hilda Teleg knew the hiding place and she went to the woman's house. She eavesdropped the same way tonight."

Baxter Clark nodded. He seemed very tired. "She told me she never meant to kill Hilda. But there was a fight when Hilda refused to talk about the treasure and Mrs. Wakasa hit her on the head and was afraid she'd killed her. So she turned on the gas to make it look like suicide. She didn't know about the birdcage till later, of course, or she'd have taken it."

"I appreciate what you've done for us, Mr. Velvet," Wen Chen said. "For one thing, you've cleared my brother of suspicion. But we still haven't found a clue to my grandfather's treasure. Baxter has taken the birdcage apart. He's checked the newspapers, the cleaning tray, the top, bottom, and sides."

"Even the bird's perches and swing inside," Clark confirmed. "There's no hidden compartment, no messages scratched or written on the cage, nothing." His forehead wrinkled as he spoke and he looked more dejected by the moment.

"I really wish I could help," Nick said, meaning it, "but your grandfather's treasure, if it ever existed, is gone forever."

"What do you mean?" Baxter Clark asked. "Hilda Teleg always told Wen Chen to look inside the birdcage if anything ever happened to her."

"Yes—but there's one thing missing from the birdcage that was there while Hilda was alive."

"Missing? What's that?"

"The bird."

"But—"

"You told me yourself, Baxter, that the bird was a parrot. When I mentioned *The Maltese Falcon,* you said the bird was a parrot, not a falcon. Parrots can be trained to talk, and most of them do. They're also long-living birds, and it wouldn't be unusual for Hilda Teleg's parrot to have lived fifty years in captivity. We'll never prove it now, but I believe Hilda Teleg entrusted her parrot with a few key words about your grandfather's treasure."

"Then Mrs. Wakasa—"

"Exactly. When she turned on the gas to kill Hilda, she also killed the only clue that might have led her to the treasure."

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

"I gave them this address when Doc Sobol made arrangements for me to stay here for a spell," Amory explained.

"What'll you do," Scotty asked, "if the letter don't never come?"

"Oh, it'll come. The only letters that don't ever come are the ones that tell you you've won a trip around the world or that an uncle you never knew existed has kicked off and left you his entire fortune . . ."

A LETTER FROM THE NORTH

by DONALD OLSON

As early as that spring, when he and his pal Ben would stop at the post office on their way home from school, Scotty had begun to wonder, with a canniness beyond his years, if the stranger's story about waiting for a letter might be no more than an excuse to delay the man's departure. Yet the boy's imagination failed to produce any reason why such an obviously big-city type of fellow should choose to remain any longer than necessary in such a drowsy backwater hamlet as Plato Switch.

The stranger had wrecked his car in an accident on the interstate, and when sufficiently recovered from his injuries to leave the clinic in nearby Corydon old Doc Sobol had arranged with his friend Colleen Timkin for the young man to board with the widow and her nine-year-old son until he was fit to travel.

Had money not been a perennial problem since her husband died, Colleen would never have considered taking a stranger into her home. She possessed, moreover, a heart as warmly sympathetic as her Irish blue eyes and was favorably impressed by Rex Amory's quiet demeanor, his manly good looks, and his eager promise to

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make himself as useful as his condition would allow around the once proud but now visibly dilapidating frame house on Dutch Hollow Road.

By the end of the month he was quite strong enough to have resumed his trip, yet he put off his departure while finishing the job he'd undertaken of repainting Colleen's kitchen and declaring himself reluctant to leave until an expected letter arrived regarding the outcome of some unspecified business deal in the North.

Colleen was not unwilling for him to remain. She found his company agreeable, his behavior faultless, and his efforts to win the trust of her young son both touching as well as somewhat dismaying in the face of Scotty's coolly adolescent reserve. The boy had been hard hit by the loss of his father and, if he didn't actually repulse Amory's friendly advances, his attitude remained for some time one of suspended judgment.

Once the painting was finished, there was no end to other repair jobs to be done. As Colleen lamented, "I'm afraid this old house will tumble down around our ears one of these days. It would cost a fortune to hire all the work that needs doing."

"Don't worry," Amory cheerfully assured her, "it's a lot sturdier than you think. Just needs a bit of face-lifting here and there."

"Maybe so, but I can't expect you to do it—not for the price of a bed and a few meals."

"I've got nothing better to do until that letter comes," he replied, and when she said it could be sent on to him if he left her an address he regarded her with a quizzical, half teasing smile. "Is that a polite way of saying it's time for me to hit the road?"

Colleen blushed, which she did much too easily for her own comfort.

"I didn't mean that at all."

"Good." Standing at the screen door, he gazed past the line of washing flapping in the breeze and beyond the stretch of meadowland to the distant hazy outline of the Blue Ridge. "You know, this is the first taste of down-home life I've enjoyed since I was Scotty's age. Washing on the line, cherry trees in blossom, the sound of crickets in the night, the smell of home cooking. I'd almost forgotten what it was like."

"A spell of country quiet makes most city folk restless."

"I wasn't always city folk."

"You could have fooled me."

They both laughed. Their eyes met—then, with a flurry of move-

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ment as if to break the ensuing moment's awkwardness, Colleen rose to refill his coffee cup as he returned to the table.

As summer advanced, Amory kept himself busy with repair jobs, seemingly quite content to stay around the house, never venturing into the town itself. Meanwhile, Colleen began to feel increasingly grateful to her boarder for his impeccably correct behavior, his never presuming to take the slightest liberty, for she couldn't, being a young and healthy woman, remain unconscious of a subtle emotional upheaval within herself whenever she felt Amory's intensely virile brown eyes resting upon her face, as if awaiting some message of the senses as patiently as he awaited that letter from the North. She had thought the armor of respectability would shield her not only from any gossip that might arise from Amory's protracted stay but from any possibility of allowing herself to be affected by the man's disturbingly physical presence. She now found herself both wishing for—and dreading—the arrival of that long-expected letter.

It was Scotty who put into words what Colleen had been too polite to suggest:

"You reckon they maybe don't know where to send it, Rex? Maybe that's why you don't get the letter."

It was true that Rex had never given Scotty any letters of his own to mail and so far as Colleen knew he'd never once used the phone. His reason had made sense to her. As he had said, "Sometimes a guy reaches a point where he needs to get clear of everyone and everything, just hole up and kind of sort things out in his life, make damn sure he's heading in the right direction."

Now he said, "Oh, they'd know, sport. I gave them this address when Doc Sobol made arrangements for me to stay here for a spell."

"What'll you do," the boy asked, "if the letter don't never come?"

"Oh, it'll come. The only letters that don't ever come are the ones that tell you you've won a trip around the world or that an uncle you never knew existed has kicked off and left you his entire fortune."

One day Scotty surprised Colleen by asking: "Mom, do you think Rex is really waiting for a letter?"

"Why would he say so if it wasn't true?"

Scotty shrugged. "I don't know. So he can stay here with us, maybe?"

"Do you want him to stay?"

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The boy looked thoughtful. "Not at first I didn't."

"You've missed not having your father, haven't you, Scotty?"

"Heck, yes. Who wouldn't? But what's the good of having a dad if he might up and leave all of a sudden?"

His words echoed Colleen's own inner distrust of investing her affections at the risk of suffering yet another devastating emotional loss.

She twined her arms around Scotty's thin shoulders, hugging him to her. "But you do *like* Rex, don't you?"

"He's okay. He knows a lot about hunting and fishing and it's fun to go swimming with him down at Mill Run. He's got a scar on his belly, Mom. It's *this* long." He drew a line with his finger diagonally along his lower abdomen. "He told me he got it when he was fighting as a mercenary in Central America. He's had some really neat adventures."

Colleen smiled. "Don't you go believing everything he tells you." She wanted Scotty to like Rex, but not to go overboard. Not yet. Hero worship could be dangerous.

"Like about the letter, you mean?" And then with a slyly provocative glance into her eyes: "Even if the letter comes, he wouldn't have to know."

"Scotty—"

"I'm the one picks up the mail. I reckon I could—well, you know—sort of lose it?"

The softness went out of her eyes. "Scotty! Shame on you. That would be a wicked, malicious thing to do. Promise me you won't ever play a dirty trick like that."

"I was just kidding, Mom. But I hope it never comes. I hope he made it all up about the letter."

Aside from those implausible tales he'd spun for Scotty and that one allusion to having lived in the country as a boy, Rex had spoken hardly at all about his life before the car crash on the interstate had stranded him in Plato Switch. Although naturally curious, Colleen admired that quality of reticence in her boarder. It reminded her of her husband, Tom.

Tom, too, had been a quiet man—sometimes too quiet—but it was a quietness she equated with great inner strength. That she recognized this same quality in Rex made it all the harder for her to resist her growing attraction to him.

She wasn't about to go off the deep end, however. From those bits and pieces of personal information Rex had woven into their con-

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versations, she'd been left with the picture of a footloose man, uncommitted but not indecisive, something of a rolling stone, a man looking for what he probably wouldn't even recognize if he found it.

If life in the house on Dutch Hollow Road had gradually acquired something of that sense of balance and continuity which it had lost with the death of Tom Timkin, Colleen refused to get her hopes up. Perhaps if Rex had said to her, "Look, I have to level with you, Colleen. I'm not really waiting for any letter. It was just an excuse not to leave. Truth is, I don't want to leave. Ever," then perhaps she might have lowered her guard sooner than she did.

Instead, every day when Scotty came back from the post office Rex would call out with an eagerness that sounded too genuine to be an act: "Hey, what you got there, sport, my letter from the North?" Not for the life of her would Colleen have asked if the letter was a myth. If the whole thing was a game, then she would simply play along until, one way or another, it came to an end.

Nothing changed until, a few days after school reopened in the fall, Scotty arrived home one afternoon looking noticeably glum. He scarcely opened his mouth at the dinner table. "What's the matter, honey?" his mother asked. "Not hungry?"

"Not very."

"You feeling okay? You're mighty quiet."

"I'm okay." He looked across at Rex. "I thought I saw you today."

"You did? Where?"

Scotty hesitated. "In town."

Rex grinned. "What'd you do, sport, stop off for a beer at the Bucket o'Blood? That's about the only place in town you'd be likely to see me—if I ever went into town, which I don't. Ask your mom."

"It was when Ben and me were picking up the mail."

Rex winked at Colleen. "Must have been my twin brother."

"Go on, you don't have no twin brother." Scotty knew that Rex was fibbing when he said he never went into town. Where else would he be going when Scotty, star-gazing out of his window long after he should have been asleep, had more than once seen him ambling off down the road leading nowhere but into town?

Rex said: "You speak to him?"

"Who?"

"This guy you thought was me."

"I knew it wasn't really you."

"Go on, I bet you thought it was. Yes, sir, I bet you thought I'd

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snuck into town and picked up the mail before you got there, just to see if I'd got my letter from the North."

At this, with the pained look of a child who knows he's being patronized and resents it, Scotty said, "I don't believe there's any old letter. I bet you just made it up."

"Scotty!" Colleen shot him a look of ungentle reproof.

"You're wrong, sport," said Rex. "A guy's got to believe in something, don't you know that? Like I believe in my letter from the North. Life gets pretty sad if you wake up in the morning with nothing to look forward to. You know what I mean?"

Scotty's gaze remained on Rex's face, inquisitive, dissatisfied, faintly accusing, with the hint of a challenge. Then he lowered his eyes to his plate. "I didn't really think it was you. But he looked like you, that guy."

"Well, you take my word for it, sport. I passed through Plato Switch just once, on my way here, and I didn't see a thing worth going back for."

A few nights later, unable to sleep, Scotty heard the clock downstairs chiming midnight. He suddenly felt an urgent need to confide in his mother, to feel the warmth of her reassurance, to be told he'd been wrong, imagining impossible things. He slipped out of bed and stole across the hall to his mother's room and softly opened the door. Moonlight lay cold and ghostly across her empty bed.

Scotty shut the door, returned to his room, paused, then padded stealthily down the hall to the room where Rex slept. He put his ear against the door and stood listening, listening. He shivered in the drafty darkness, seized by a feeling of confusion, loneliness, and fear. Something like the sense of profound loss he'd experienced when his mother had come into his room late that night to tell him that his father was dead.

He arrived home from school two days later to find his mother separating clumps of polyanthus along the side of the porch. She looked up and smiled, leaving a faint smudge of dirt on her forehead as she brushed back her hair.

Scotty waved the envelope without enthusiasm. "It came, Mom. A letter for Rex."

A cloud seemed to pass across his mother's face. She rose slowly from her knees, barely glanced at the envelope without touching it.

"Well, I reckon you'd best give it to him. He's around back, working on the roof . . ."

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Scotty played at Ben's house after school the following day and didn't get home until dinnertime. He noticed immediately that only two places had been set at the table. "Where's Rex?" he asked, too innocently. Amory hadn't once mentioned the letter since Scotty had put it into his hands. Scotty had asked no questions—nor, so far as he knew, had his mother.

"Gone."

"When?"

"I found a note when I got back from the market. Said he didn't like goodbyes."

"That's all?"

"He promised he'd be back. Someday." Her tone was remote, falsely light, with not even a pretense of conviction.

"Didn't he say nothing about the letter?"

"Not a word."

"Didn't you ask him about it?"

"I told you, I didn't see him. He was gone when I got back." She ran a hand abstractedly across his hair. "It was his business. None of mine."

"We don't care, do we, Mom? Shows he really didn't care a snap about us, right? Or he wouldn't have taken off like that."

Colleen sighed, forced a smile. "You're right, honey. We don't care."

Scotty and Ben stopped as usual at the post office the following afternoon.

Ben said, "You gonna put it back?"

"Nah."

Ben poked him in the ribs. "That was dumb, swiping it."

He glanced at the sheaf of F.B.I. posters tacked to the bulletin board above the counter, ugly photographs of wanted fugitives with information about their misdeeds and descriptions of their identifying scars, tattoos, and other physical characteristics, posters the two boys read each day with morbid fascination. Ben said jeeringly, "You didn't really see that guy around here. Bank robbers wouldn't waste their time in a burg like this."

"They might if they were hiding out. But you're right. It wasn't the guy I saw hitchhiking on Elm Creek Road. It just looked like him."

Ben giggled. "I can just see you going up to that guy and saying,

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'Hey, mister, will you take your shirt off so I can see if you got a scar on your belly?' "

"I told you, I wasn't even that close to him."

Ben said: "So what did you do with the poster?"

Scotty shrugged. "I sent it to a friend. Just for a joke."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

STICK TO THE WEAPON YOU KNOW

by I. KATNY

"An accident," said the patrolman
As he studied the corpse with disdain.
"He fell from the ladder while cleaning
And the knife pierced his jugular vein."

"Suicide," argued the Sergeant.
"He intended to fall on the knife.
One wouldn't clean walls with a carver—
He deliberately took his own life."

"Murder," declared the Lieutenant,
"By a person or persons unknown.
That knife is too blunt to have done it—
I'm afraid that the culprit has flown."

"Regrettable error," said Cupid
As he crossed the man's name off his list.
"I really am getting quite careless—
I aimed for his heart, but I missed."

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a *NEW* Maynard Bullock story by

JAMES POWELL

You didn't want to mess with hoop-snake venom. Nevertheless, Bullock could understand why the lab report raised many an eyebrow, for, according to legend, Ste. Agathe had driven the hoop snakes south of the Forty-ninth Parallel a full three hundred years before . . .

THE STING OF THE HOOP SNAKE

by JAMES POWELL

Among the flowerbeds under the jurisdiction of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on Parliament Hill in Ottawa is one set off a bit by itself on a grassy slope canting down toward a railing that guards against the sheer drop to the river below. The last to feel the warm touch of spring, the first to know winter's heavy hand, it is a flowerbed tourists seldom find and every Mountie in Headquarters Company dreads. The Mounties call the place The Leap. It is a disciplinary flowerbed. Men are assigned there as punishment for grave infractions of the Mountie code. The culprit is expected to stand at the brink and reconsider his career on the Force with the tacit understanding that any man who throws himself to his death from The Leap will be inscribed on Mountie rolls as having died honorably in the line of duty.

Only one man has ever been sent to The Leap twice.

Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock stared down at the swirling waters of the Ottawa River contemplating his Mountie career, which once again lay in ruins. His first assignment to The Leap had been

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the time he'd closed that damn limousine door on the Prime Minister's hand. (Even now Bullock winced, remembering the sound of those breaking bones.) But he hadn't let the powers that be keep a good man down. By godfrey, he'd pulled himself up by his bootstraps, getting things back on track by massive doses of volunteer work—like setting up folding chairs for concerts by the Mountie glee club and stints as a bingo caller-out at Horseman's End, the Force's retirement home up the Gatineau.

Well, volunteer work wasn't going to do the trick this time. As a matter of fact, it was his membership in the Musical Ride Boosters' Club that led to this, his second fall from grace. The Boosters were Mounties who gave freely of their off-duty time to promote the Musical Ride, getting neighborhood shopkeepers to display posters when it performed locally, distributing handbills, and doing the many joe-jobs behind the scenes. The last time out, Bullock was given lanyard laundry duty. These white cords which looped around the neck and led down to an eyelet on the butt of the holstered pistol had to be kept immaculate. To make a long story short, Bullock had meant to check the *Rush—Special Order* box on the laundry list but he'd hit *Double Starch* instead. The lanyards came back as rigid as unstrung badminton rackets. With five desperate minutes to curtain, each of the Musical Ride people had had to make a hundred little breaks in his lanyard, using his cold-cream jar and the edge of the dressing-room table. The final effect had not been as successful as Bullock had prayed it might be.

Well, he had another plan to get himself rehabilitated. Nevertheless, because he thought it was expected of him, Bullock always spent the first fifteen minutes of his days at The Leap looking down into the swirling waters and brooding over the royal hash he'd made of things. Again.

This particular morning, as Bullock leaned over the railing and gave out a large sigh, he felt something grab his sleeve. Turning, he found himself looking down at a black bear that stood a good four feet tall and wore a Stetson, a scarlet Mountie tunic, and a peg leg. The animal's stern look said, Good godfrey, man, get a grip on yourself!

Bullock recognized Headquarters Company's new mascot. The bear was a familiar figure, marching—left-tap, left-tap, left-tap—at the head of the Mountie contingent during the colorful daily Changing of the Embassy Guard ceremonies. A Mountie from a northern detachment had found him as a cub, one leg caught in a trap. The

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vets couldn't save the leg. Since they couldn't return the crippled animal to the wild, the detachment adopted him, fitting him out in a scarlet tunic, Stetson, and wooden leg. When a couple of the men from Manitoba started calling the bear Winnie-the-Peg, the name stuck.

The Mounties were soon taking the bear around to district schools when they spoke on traffic safety or promoted the Don't Dump on Canada anti-littering campaign. They fixed up the ferrule of the wooden leg with a retractable spindle and Winnie made quite a show stumping around, spearing paper litter with his wooden leg. After a couple of appearances on local television, the bear was picked up by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and overnight won the hearts of boys and girls across the country. Spotting a big tourist draw and a walking media event, Mountie Public Relations quickly assigned Winnie to Ottawa.

Bullock had watched the tragic ending to this story all last week on television. One night they found Winnie absent from his embassy security post. He was later discovered beside the Rideau Canal with blood on his muzzle and half a rhinestone dog collar at his feet—a dog collar with diplomatic tags. The French ambassador's wife never saw her miniature apricot poodle again. Amid the diplomatic uproar, the French fleet slipped out of Toulon, destination unknown. RCMP Commissioner McNaughton wanted to take the manly way out and have the bear shot, but thousands of Canadian boys and girls would have rioted in the streets. Bullock had wondered what his superiors were going to do. Well, now he knew. They'd decided to send the bear to The Leap. Politics makes strange flowerbedfellows.

Bullock and Winnie got along well from the start. The Chelsea buns had a lot to do with that. Children were always making their parents search out the remote flowerbed to see Winnie and feed him the sticky buns he devoured so eagerly on television. As a matter of fact, the bear got many more buns than he could eat without doing himself harm.

Bullock was always ready to help out in this department, wiping his sticky fingers on the animal's thick pelt. And it flattered him to see how quickly Winnie took to mimicking his every stance and gesture, down to his habit of running a knuckle through his moustache or pacing the perimeter of the flowerbed with his hands clasped behind his back. Winnie even learned to set his jaw the way Bullock did when tourists hove in sight. This set the Mountie to thinking.

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He had always figured the best way to win a place in the Force's pantheon of adventure heroes was to come up with a faithful sidekick. Dogs and horses had been done to death, no doubt about that. But a bear might be just the ticket: Bullock of the Mounted and his trusty bear companion, Winnie-the-Peg. Whenever he could work it in, he talked to Winnie about teamwork and partners a guy could count on in a pinch and the nobility of laying down your life for your buddy. The bear always listened politely before returning to his own solemn thoughts.

At the end of the day, duty done, Bullock would walk Winnie over to the Parliamentary Library parking lot where a Mountie minivan would be waiting. It would take the bear and any oldsters who'd spent the day in town back to the retirement home, where Winnie would be penned up for the night.

But one afternoon the van failed to show. They told Bullock that as it crossed the Rideau Canal early that morning on its way back to Horseman's End, the van's scarlet, blue, and lemon paint had suddenly started to flake off, the headlights and chrome clattered to the pavement, and the driver slumped over the steering wheel, unconscious. The vehicle had crashed into a bridge abutment. Embedded in its side an observant Mountie investigator discovered a small purple dart of a primitive sort, which lab tests determined had been dipped in potent hoop-snake venom.

Bullock shuddered. He'd heard much about the deadly sting of the hoop snake. He'd been raised by an aunt who ran a boarding house for young ladies in Dawson City. The old man who came in on Friday and Saturday nights to play the piano in the parlor had been full of hoop-snake stories. Bullock remembered the one where the snake, looking down from the top of a hill, saw a great moose gorging itself under a crab-apple tree. Grabbing its tail in its mouth, the snake took aim on that moose and rolled ahelling down the hill, picking up steam with every revolution. At the bottom, it launched itself straight as an arrow at its target. The moose had been at those apples all day and, the ones in its second stomach having started to ferment, was feeling no pain. In fact, at just the right moment it got a fit of the drunken staggers and went down on one knee. The hoop snake hurled on by, burying its fangs in the apple tree. So potent was its venom that the bark curled up and sloughed off the tree, baked apples rained down in a steaming torrent, the leaves withered and dropped, two dead squirrels and a petrified hive full of petrified bees fell to the ground, and a box kite caught in the

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upper branches burst into flame. No, you didn't want to mess with hoop-snake venom.

Nevertheless, Bullock could understand why the lab report raised many an eyebrow, for, according to legend, Ste. Agathe had driven the hoop snakes south of the Forty-ninth Parallel a full three hundred years before.

It was agreed Bullock would take Winnie home for the night. Actually, he was glad for the company. Good old Mavis, his wife, was visiting her mother for the week. (Mrs. Fothergill wasn't Bullock's greatest fan. No matter how much he colored his adventures, she remained unmoved in her conviction that her daughter could have done much, much better for herself.)

Bullock cleared the passenger seat for Winnie, tossing a stack of eight-by-ten glossies into the back. After he got in behind the wheel, Winnie growled until he put on his seatbelt. Bullock laughed darkly and set off.

He hadn't driven far when he noticed the grinning head about the size of a hen's egg bobbing on an elastic band in the rear window of the van ahead of them. Bullock furrowed his brow, finding this novelty automotive decoration strangely familiar. When they stopped behind the van at the next traffic light, he reached into the back seat for the stack of photographs.

Bullock's plan for getting reassigned from The Leap involved a series of unusual disappearances in Ottawa. Over the past six months, thirty-nine early-morning joggers had vanished into thin air. Bullock believed that the experience in running called "hitting the wall" could induce amnesia and that all of them were right now walking around the streets of Ottawa not knowing who they were—not even knowing whether they were anglophone or francophone. So he'd gotten their photographs and memorized their names—Bickley, Bidwell, Eggerton, Gasteau, and all the rest. Someday soon he would recognize one of them on the street, and by addressing him by name—"Good morning, Miss Bickley," "Ca va, Monsieur Gasteau"—cause their memories to come rushing back. Such disappearances were not strictly a Mountie matter, but by giving the lion's share of the credit for solving the case to his immediate superiors Bullock was sure to win his way back from The Leap.

As he was leafing through the photographs, Winnie growled. Bullock looked up to find the traffic light changed and the van well into

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a left turn. He frowned. Was that a bone in the driver's nose? But then Bullock saw the name Headwind Tours on the side of the van and had to laugh. For some time now, Ottawa had been bombarded with ads touting Headwind Tours, a travel agency specializing in cheap package tours to the legendary Golden City of Darien and the surrounding jungle paradise on the headhunter-infested Isthmus of Panama. Part of the promotion involved giveaways of these plastic bones you wore on your nose like a pince-nez.

After rattling around in the kitchen for a bit, Bullock came up with a tall can of salmon and a fat one of halved peaches. The choice proved a good one. At the table, he had to be quick about it to get his fair share. As a matter of fact, Winnie got the last of the peaches by putting a paw on Bullock's wrist and growling deep back in his throat.

During clean-up, Bullock brought the conversation around to partnership with an eloquent bit on the thrill of nick-of-time rescues. Winnie listened, but Bullock thought he saw a strange, a wilder light in those brown eyes.

Afterward they retired to the television. The evening news reported on a rumor that the French fleet meant to run the Panama Canal and then strike at the Canadian naval base at Nanimo, British Columbia. Closer to home, the announcer said, another jogger had disappeared, bringing the total to forty. At the end of the broadcast, Winnie started in with the yawns and stretches. Although it was still early by his standards, Bullock, ever the good host, suggested they turn in.

He was awakened by the sound of a stairboard creaking. His clock-radio said 11:06. Snapping on the light, he discovered the rug beside the bed was empty—Winnie was gone.

Bullock got dressed, deciding there had been enough stealth in that creak to warrant wearing his uniform. When he reached the street, Winnie was still in sight, heading westward with a determined gait, left-tap, left-tap, left-tap. Bullock followed at a distance. At the corner, the bear stopped and looked left and right before crossing the street. Was this the caution of guilt or merely the reflex action of one who'd been in the business of teaching traffic safety to school children? Very soon Bullock had something else to chew on, for they were heading toward the Rideau Canal and the scene of Winnie's crime. Was a meat-hungry monster returning to a favorite hunting spot?

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The bear took up a hiding place in the bushes beneath a streetlight across the sidewalk from the canal. Bullock waited behind a tree a few yards away, tensing each time a dog-walker passed, expecting a rush of bear from the bushes, the sweeping up of a barking victim, and flight back into the darkness. But nothing happened.

Suddenly Bullock heard the distant skirl of a bagpipe. Almost at once the water of the canal roiled, and before Bullock's astonished eyes an immense crocodile sprang halfway up onto the grass at the canal edge, a brute of a thing with armor-encrusted skin, grinning jaws, and a chest and forelegs like an English bulldog. The animal's tiny red eyes prowled the night. Satisfied that it was alone, its scalloped, tooth-studded smile grew wider still. It heaved the rest of its great torso up onto the sidewalk and slid off like greased destruction into the darkness beneath the trees.

A crocodile living beneath the peaceful waters of the Rideau Canal? But it wasn't *Crocodilus canadensis*. The white-furred or polar crocodile had been extinct long before the explorer, naturalist, and teller of tall tales, Father Louis Hennepin, arrived in Canada. His famous drawing of a she-bear defending her cubs from a pack of snapping, white-furred crocodiles in a blinding snowstorm in Bullock's grade-school history book had been based on Indian accounts.

Bullock knew there were a dozen sound reasons why he shouldn't follow after the crocodile, but before he could think of one he saw Winnie hurry away in hot pursuit. He caught up with him quickly and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. When the bear looked back at Bullock, brown vindication shone from both his eyes.

After several blocks, they saw the slithering shadow turn off into a large corner lot. The bagpipe grew louder now, coming from the rear of a substantial house. Bullock and Winnie looked at each other and entered this unknown darkness, too. Then they saw the piper, standing in exercise pants, sweatshirt, and a tam-o'-shanter beside a flight of cellar steps that led down to a bright open door.

As Bullock searched the darkness for the reptile's low shadow, he thought he detected other more erect shapes moving among the trees. Or were his old eyes playing tricks on him? Suddenly the crocodile burst from the night on its quick little legs, heading straight for the piper.

Before Bullock could call a warning, the creature had vanished down the steps and through the door. The piper gave the doorway a look of profound resignation and followed in after it, closing the door behind him.

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Bullock said, "If that poor sap owns a crocodile that feeds on diplomats' poodles, he's Mountie meat. Let's give this the old look-see."

He led Winnie down the steps and they peered through the window in the cellar door into a room dominated by a forty-foot swimming pool whose water dappled the ceiling with moving light and shadow. Along one tile wall at the shallow end of the pool was a collection of body-building equipment, including racks of dumbbells, indian clubs, and weights. The piper stood nearby talking earnestly to the crocodile, making some point by laying a hand on the small of his back. The reptile seemed unimpressed.

Suddenly Bullock recognized the man's face, the haggard, downcast look no gay tam-o'-shanter could alleviate, the prematurely grey hair. By godfrey, yes, it was Trevor Fyfe, the famous Canadian anthropologist and author. *Canada's Headhunter King* CBC Television had called its dramatization of his early life. Bullock hadn't missed a single weekly installment.

At seven, Fyfe had accompanied his archaeologist parents on a trip to Central America sponsored by Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. Only Fyfe had survived the crash of their light plane into the jungle. The Trews, the local tribe of headhunters, found the young boy dazed but unharmed beside the wreckage of the plane, voicing his sorrow on the bagpipes he'd learned to play from his father. Awestruck by the instrument, the Trews brought him to their village and raised him as their own. They taught him to decorate his face with bright vertical and horizontal stripes. They taught him the skill of the blowgun and the art of head-shrinking. Memories of Toronto faded quickly.

By young manhood, Trevor already stood two heads taller than anyone in the tribe. For this reason, on the death of the king, he was elected to take his place instead of his older foster brother. Not long after, while on a solitary expedition to collect the deadly hoop snake, whose venom they used to tip their darts, Trevor stumbled upon a Royal Ontario Museum expedition drawn to the jungle by stories of a white bagpiper living among the headhunters.

After Fyfe recovered from the shock of his return to civilization, he quickly caught up on his studies, going on to earn a doctorate in anthropology and a teaching position at Carleton University in Ottawa. Eventually he made several trips back to the Trews, who still considered him their king. They pressed him to stay, but by that time Trevor was too close to academic tenure to consider the idea.

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He wrote much on Trews society, on primitive economics and social structure—books others in his field applauded for their solid scholarship. He also authored *The ABCs of Headshrinking* for the popular Illustrated Handyman's Library series, a big seller several Christmases back praised by the critics for its genial style.

As Bullock and Winnie watched through the window, Fyfe began what looked like limbering-up exercises. Then he spread his legs, spat on his palms, and, reaching down, grabbed two handfuls of crocodile. With great effort, he lifted the creature high enough so that, by touching one knee to the floor, he could rest the crocodile's torso across the other. The reptile eyed him passively. Fyfe was breathing heavily now. With a prayerful look to heaven, he arched his back and mustered another great effort that brought the crocodile chest high. Fighting to steady his trembling legs, Fyfe now tried to hoist the great weight of the crocodile over his head. But his arms buckled and the crocodile collapsed back down on him.

As Fyfe staggered, the reptile shook itself out of his grasp and dove into the water. With an easy, powerful motion, it swam into the middle of the pool before turning to look back at him. When Fyfe averted his head to escape the jagged, mocking smile he saw Bullock and Winnie at the glass in the door and his expression changed from utter dejection to perplexity, and then to indignation. Still breathing heavily, he threw open the door and demanded, "What gives with the peeping tomfoolery?"

Bullock drew himself up to his full height. "Mr. Fyfe," he said in his official no-nonsense voice, "we have reason to believe your crocodile there ate a certain diplomatic poodle, causing the blame to fall on my trusty companion here."

"Come the hell in," said Fyfe with a worried shake of the head, ushering them inside. "Take my word for it, that's the least of our worries."

The three lined up at the shallow end of the pool, doing their best to meet the crocodile's implacable gaze, then Fyfe said: "Here's the situation. If we don't come up with a way to get me out of this jam, a bunch of headhunters, their blowguns tipped with hoop-snake venom, are going to go through Canada like a dose of salts.

"Look," he said, "you know my name, so you know I'm king of the headhunting Trews. Their King across the Water, they call me, 'water' being their name for the Panama Canal. I'm the one they come to when things need fixing. Well, several years back a gang of adventurers and treasure hunters shot their way through to the

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fabulous Golden City of Darien and discovered the truth: the place is really only a ruined village of huts of yellow mud built in a mosquito-infested swamp instead of a treasure trove of priceless jewels and artifacts. Of course, the news sent the whole Trews economy down the toilet. I mean, they needed a legend of a golden city to lure the foolhardy into the jungle, providing fresh heads to keep the headhunter economy fluid."

While Fyfe had been talking, Winnie had been eyeing the crocodile with the inborn hatred Father Hennepin's drawing had captured so well. Now he got down on all three legs, extended his body over the edge of the pool, and, swaying back and forth, growled as if challenging his ancient enemy to combat.

"When do we get to the part where the poodle comes in?" demanded Bullock.

Turning his attention back to Bullock, Fyfe said, "Will you hold your horses on the damn poodle? I'm getting there. Just try to follow what I'm saying. You see, I got this brilliant idea that a good dose of tourism might cure the Trews of what ailed them. Hell, a little spray paint would go a long way to gilding the Golden City. And there was an old run-aground paddlewheel they could fix up as a hotel. Clearing a landing strip and putting up a wind sock wouldn't be that hard. And after a few shakedown tours, maybe they could—well, you know, start harvesting two or three heads a go. There are a couple in every group that'd be no great loss—the whiner, the nagger, the bore, the buttinski. They'd be easy enough to spot at the airport at this end. They'd get special flight-bags to mark them for our people in the field."

"But why Canada, for gosh sakes?" demanded Bullock.

"There's something about the heft of the Canadian head that says hard currency to the Trews," explained Fyfe. "Shouldn't we be proud of that? I mean, it isn't the number of heads a Trew owns that makes him wealthy, it's the quality of those heads. What they prize most is heft. Next comes ruddiness of complexion, as though the head was earned at the end of a long chase through the jungle. And they admire laugh lines very much, too. Yes, it takes a real pile of your grey, lightweight, grumpy-looking heads to amount to anything. But as the Trews say, 'Mony apickle maks amickle,' which I guess we'd translate as 'It all adds up.' "

"Be that as it may," said Bullock sternly, "with all that killing, sooner or later people will get suspicious."

"Look," said Fyfe wearily, "try to keep up with me, okay? I told

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you the whiners and the buttinskis would be the first to go. Besides, by running the entire operation ourselves, we can doctor the passenger lists to show everybody's been delivered back to their Canadian point of departure. What happened to them after that isn't our headache, right? That's why I shelled out the money to send the Trews to hotel-management school and to train as airline pilots, stewardesses, and travel agents."

"Don't tell me, let me guess," said Bullock grimly. "You started by killing off a whole jogging club from Bickley to Gasteau and all the way down the line."

Fyfe looked genuinely puzzled. "We haven't killed anybody yet," he insisted. "Like I said, we're still at the shakedown stage. Anybody who flies Headwind Tours these days gets the red carpet all the way to the Golden City and back home safe and sound."

At this point, the crocodile, who had been whipping the pool water into a frenzy, made a sudden rush to the edge of the pool, hurled itself up into the air, and, snout to snout with Winnie, smiled the hungry smile a predator gives its prey. The bear stood his ground, but Bullock and Fyfe jumped back several steps.

Recovering himself, Fyfe admitted, "Of course, my plan had a built-in risk. It put the Trews in closer contact with modern civilization than I'd have liked. My foster brother and his followers, who we'd sent to Las Vegas to learn roulette and dealing blackjack, developed a weakness for daiquiris and were talkative in their cups. The mob learned about Headwind Tours and decided to turn it into a kind of Murder Incorporated operation. The guy the customer pays to have eliminated gets a letter telling him he's won a two-week, all-expenses-paid trip to the Golden City of Darien, Jewel of the Isthmus of Panama. A few weeks later, the customer gets a small box in the mail with his enemy's shrunken head in it to use as a toggle on his zipper pull. The mob gets the money. The Trews get ice-making machines, rum, and daiquiri mix."

"But you're their king," insisted Bullock. "You could stop that kind of madness."

"This Las Vegas business comes at a very bad time," said Fyfe. "You see, tomorrow's my fortieth birthday, which will be something of a celebration for my people. They'll send a delegation here. There will be speeches. And I'll be expected to display my bona fides."

"Ah," said Bullock warily.

"Darn right," said Fyfe. "Each male child of the Trews royal family is given a baby crocodile as a pet early on and told to lift it over his

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head at least once a day. When the kid reaches manhood, he's expected to be able to lift a full-grown crocodile.

"Now, since human flesh is abhorrent to the headhunters, they throw their victims' remains to the crocodiles. Actually, I understand that the woolly isthmus lemur is the crocodile's first food of choice. Those who make a study of such things tell me it tastes very much like a miniature apricot poodle." Here Fyfe pointed an index finger at the ceiling to show, as promised, he'd brought the story back to the poodle.

"I guess the point I'm trying to make is that the full-grown Trews crocodile is a particularly fat customer. Nevertheless, being able to lift one over his head is the mark of the headhunter king. Should he at any time be unable to do so—and if you were watching just now, you know I can't, although God knows I've been trying to get myself in shape ever since they smuggled that monster into the country disguised as a piece of luggage—then he must endure a trial by water. Armed only with a knife, he must dive in and fight the crocodile to the death. If I survive, I promise you Headwind Tours will never get off the ground. But if I'm killed, my foster brother will rule in my place and Murder Incorporated will ride again."

"By godfrey, man," laughed Bullock, crossing to a telephone on the wall, "you wouldn't last ten seconds in the water with that croc." He lifted the receiver and heard a hum. "But not to worry. The Mounties have the matter in hand. Tomorrow we'll throw a ring of men around this place and grab these headhunters of yours when they show. Interpol will handle the rest."

Just then a clock from somewhere in the house struck midnight and the telephone line went dead. Bullock shook the receiver and stared down into it.

"That must be the birthday delegation now," said Fyfe. "I don't think they'll let you go for help. They know Canadian law doesn't hold with cockfights, pit bulls, or duels to the death between men and crocodiles."

"I'd sure like to see mere darts tipped with hoop-snake venom stop us, eh, Winnie old man?" said Bullock, spreading on the bravado a bit thick.

The night had turned warm and humid. The trees seemed wilder than before. Beneath the distant streetlight on the corner, the shadows were lush fronds. As man and bear crouched waiting for their eyes to grow atuned to the darkness, Bullock found himself remem-

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bering a trick to do with hoop snakes the old piano player had taught him. When the darn thing comes barreling down the hill, you step nimbly aside and jump through the hoop. After that, the snake will be your friend forever. And your enemies will be its enemies. By godfrey, maybe he'd get two and carry them around across his chest like cartridge belts. Bullock of the Mounted and his trusty hoop-snake companions. That should make the criminal element sit up and take notice. And headquarters, too.

The shrill, complicated cry of a bird cut through the night, bringing Bullock back to reality. He'd had a nickel scribbler in grade school featuring Birds of Other Lands on the cover—bright, unforgettable plumage, a peacock-blue unlike any Canadian sky, a parrot so green you wanted to run off and join the pirates, a macaw-red redder than apples. He heard these colors now as headhunter signaled headhunter, turning the darkness into a bright, loud aviary.

"Okay, here's the plan," whispered Bullock. "We're just a Mountie and a Mountie mascot out for an evening stroll, eh? God willing, maybe they'll fall under the spell of the uniform. Whatever you do, don't panic and try to run for it." They stood up and started across the dark lawn, both moving with a stiff facsimile of casualness toward the corner streetlight. The bird calls grew in shrill intensity, the racket swelling to a crescendo.

Then it stopped.

The shock of the silence rooted Bullock to the spot and made him suck in his breath. He thought he heard headhunters inhaling, too, and the rustle of darkness as they raised their blowguns. But no darts came. Instead, a young couple walking hand in hand completely engrossed in themselves turned the corner and started slowly up the sidewalk. The jungle fled before them. The air grew crisp. The trees and bushes tidied themselves. No tropical terror lurked in the shadows now. Then all at once the couple chose to cross the street, vanishing into the darkness.

The bird calls rushed back at full-fever pitch, and the heat and humidity, too. Forcing a laugh, Bullock shouted, "Race you to the streetlight, Winnie!" and bolted. He regretted the laughter at once, fearing it would give him desirable laugh lines. Something buzzed past his ear and it wasn't a mosquito. Winnie must have heard it, too, because, peg leg or not, he hit the gas and pulled alongside. They ran together neck and neck.

Bullock turned to look back at the dark shapes pursuing them and didn't see the thin headhunter step out from behind the street-

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light. The dull sound of the dart leaving the blowgun made his head snap around. Just then, Winnie sprang sideways and knocked him out of the way. As Bullock slammed into the ground, he heard the sound of the dart hitting home, then Winnie's body came crashing down on him like a ton of bricks.

Winnie lay without moving in the dim light from the streetlamp. Crawling out from under him, Bullock felt the bear's nose. It was dry and cold. He pulled open the bear's tunic and put an ear to the hairy chest. There was no heartbeat. Bullock felt the stab of remorse in his throat. Just a moment ago he'd been wishing for a pair of hoop-snake sidekicks. Would a blasted hoop snake have given his life so his partner could live? Don't make me laugh! he thought bitterly.

Still mourning, Bullock realized he was surrounded by legs. He looked up at the circle of short men. Funny—apart from the blowguns, the bones in their noses, and the plaidish crisscross of face paint, you'd have passed any one of them on the street without a second look. Their clothes ranged from business suits to slacks and polo shirts. Two dragged Winnie's remains into the bushes, the others prodded Bullock with their blowguns and gestured back toward the house.

Under the watchful eye of the headhunter guards, Bullock stood off to one side along the cellar wall and heard the delegation deliver what he supposed were congratulatory speeches of a birthday sort in Trews, a nasal tongue. Perhaps the bones in the noses accounted for that. Then the one in the three-piece suit drew a necklace of forty shrunken heads—one for each year of the king's life—from a burlap bag and placed the hideous loop around Fyfe's neck, carefully turning all the heads so they faced out.

By godfrey, Bullock exclaimed to himself, it was Bickley, Bidwell, Eggerton, and Gasteau—and so on down the line to what's-his-name, the new guy. The headhunters had killed the joggers to make this ghastly birthday present for their king. If the leftovers went to the croc, then somewhere there was an underwater den strewn with pricy running shoes. (Bullock had recently read in an article by those who make a study of such things that the more expensive the shoe, the more indigestible it was.)

For a moment Fyfe squirmed under Bullock's relentless gaze. Then, turning away, he struck a noble pose and spoke in Trews to the headhunters as their king, ending with impassioned gestures

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at the crocodile and his own sciatic indisposition. At the end, the sympathetic headhunters huddled together, talking in half whispers.

Fyfe turned to Bullock, and with a throw of his hands to indicate the hideous necklace said, "All right, damn it, they shouldn't have done this. Not in Canada. It just goes to show how bad their economy is. Believe you me, the Trews are a kindhearted crew. They had nothing against these men. If they could have taken the head without killing the man, they would have in a shot."

Before Bullock could answer, the headhunter delegation concluded its discussion. The man in the three-piece suit stepped forward, handed the king a dagger, and spoke, gesturing first at Bullock and then at the crocodile.

Fyfe grinned at Bullock. "Hey, here's a news flash, sports fans. The word is that the king can have a surrogate for the water trial. You know—some dumb stoop to fight the crocodile for him."

"Good luck," chuckled Bullock, looking around the room to see if anyone looked stupid enough to take on the job.

"You know," said Fyfe earnestly, "you put your finger on it back there. Here I am, a sedentary college professor with a bad back—I wouldn't last ten seconds in there, I'm not ashamed to admit it. Then what? Then they'll have to kill you, too, just to hush things up. And afterward Headwind Tours will decimate Canada. I mean, who's to stop them?

"But let's suppose *you* fight the crocodile. Heroic stuff—that's right down a Mountie's alley, right? But, okay, suppose worse comes to worst and the croc wins. Well, the Trews just told me I'd get to live, though I'd no longer be king. Get my drift? At least somebody'd be left to blow the whistle on Headwind Tours."

The man's logic was almost enough to make Bullock cry. Still, if Winnie could lay down his life for him, shouldn't he be willing to do the same for Canada? Didn't stuff like that come with the paycheck? Muttering to himself, Bullock took the dagger. The headhunters gave him a hearty round of applause by beating their blowguns on the side of their legs before spreading out around the pool to watch the battle.

"Maybe this'll help," whispered Fyfe, staying at Bullock's ear. "Crocs go for the arms and legs first. Then after a bit of cat-and-mouse, he'll drag you down to the bottom and finish you off."

Down at the deep end of the pool, the crocodile was lashing the water into a froth with its excited tail. Then it rushed around in a

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large sinuous circle, dove deep to the bottom, and burst up out of the water with enough force to display two-thirds of its length—wicked claws, smiling, toothy maw, twinkling eyes and all.

Second thoughts made Bullock turn back from the edge of the pool. But finding himself facing the business end of twenty blowpipes, he decided to go down fighting. Playing his cards right, maybe he could jump on the crocodile's back, keep out of reach of those terrible jaws, and ride the damn thing like a bronco until it cried uncle. Would he make it his trusty sidekick? No, he'd never have another sidekick after Winnie-the-Peg. Bullock took off his scarlet tunic, wrapped it around his left forearm, and slashed experimentally in the air with the knife. Come on, crocodile—this was payback time! Bullock started down the ladder into the shallow end. By godfrey, the water was cold!

But suddenly a commotion broke out at the other end of the pool. Amid exclamations in Trews, a shape burst out onto the diving board. Bullock couldn't believe his eyes. It was Winnie coming back to life! Looking neither left nor right, the bear sprang down onto the back of the surprised crocodile, burying his muzzle in the reptile's neck. The headhunters raised their blowguns. But then they lowered them again. Why couldn't a surrogate have a surrogate, too?

Hissing loudly with pain, the crocodile dove down deep. It careened around the bottom of the pool, dragging against the walls in a vain effort to strip Winnie from his perch. Trailing blood like a smoking fighter plane, the crocodile did four lengths of the pool before bursting out of the water and doing a kind of barrel roll. The bear stuck like glue.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" shouted Bullock. But then the crocodile hit the water with a terrible, bone-jarring belly flop that tossed Winnie high into the air. The crocodile was waiting, jaws wide, when the bear dropped back into the pool. The water churned. Bullock and the headhunters strained their eyes to follow the bloody underwater battle. When Winnie broke surface briefly, everyone cheered. But in the next instant the bear was dragged under again. Suddenly the pool turned a deeper red and the water grew calm.

Bullock held his breath. The headhunters stood in silence. Then slowly from out of the murky depths rose a monstrous apparition as white as pestilence itself. The belly-up carcass of the dead crocodile broke the surface of the water, a peg leg protruding from its lower jaw. The headhunters' astonished looks changed to jabbering

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amusement when they saw the bright-purple blowgun dart embedded in the wood.

By godfrey, that was it, thought Bullock. The dart had only gotten Winnie's peg leg. But even that was enough hoop-snake venom to stun the bear into a deathlike state. When Winnie returned to consciousness, he saw another chance to save his partner's life while doing battle with a primordial enemy. When the great reptile made the mistake of going for the peg leg, it triggered the Don't Dump on Canada spindle, injecting a lethal dose of hoop-snake venom from the wood into the crocodile's jaw.

Bullock pulled Winnie up the ladder. Putting an arm around the bear's waist, he helped him over to a bench. When he turned around again, he was looking back down the business ends of the blowguns.

"Don't try to follow us, Bullock," said Fyfe as he and the headhunters backed toward the door. "I'm returning with my people to the Isthmus of Panama. You and I know they wouldn't last a day in that jungle we call a prison system. As for me, I've decided it's better to be headhunter king than endure the tedious hack and slash of academic life. Besides, I've got a new book coming out that's going to make things pretty damn hot for me around here.

"Oh, don't worry," he added. "I'll put the kibosh on Headwind Tours. And don't worry about the Trews economy. It'll survive. Prosper, maybe. Hey, how about this? We'll spread the word that we're the ones to see if you want to take out a contract on an enemy. Just apply in person to our offices in the Golden City of Darien. That should keep the heads rolling in for a long time to come. Maybe that'll make up for the harm we've done here in Ottawa. Well, goodbye, Bullock—you and your bear friend make quite a team."

Bullock's superiors refused to accept any part of his story until the other half of a certain rhinestone dog collar was discovered in the dead crocodile's stomach. But the vindicated bear made it clear by growls and gestures that he wouldn't leave The Leap unless Bullock was reassigned, too.

So it was that Bullock took up his regular duties in front of the Parliament Buildings. The next time he saw Winnie-the-Peg, the bear was back marching in the Changing of the Embassy Guard ceremony wearing a spanking new peg leg with a ball-and-claw ferrule and a rosette of the Legion of Honor, a gift from an apologetic France, in his tunic lapel. Lucky dog, thought Bullock, as he and the bear exchanged winks.

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But Bullock never got anyone to buy the business about Headwind Tours or the necklace of shrunken heads. The presence of a Sisman Scamper Deluxe jogging shoe in the crocodile's stomach his superiors dismissed as coincidental, just as Trevor Fyfe's disappearance they wrote off as some murderous tempest in some academic teapot, a piddling matter beneath the notice of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

As Fyfe predicted, his new book created a furor. His *The Haggis Connection* offered solid evidence that the Trews were the descendants of Scots from the disastrous Darien Expedition, the merchant colony on the Isthmus of Panama destroyed by the Spaniards at the end of the Seventeenth Century. The book further demonstrated how it was the Trews who introduced the ancient Scottish practice of headhunting into Latin America and noted that the stitching on Trews shrunken heads was identical with stitching on primitive Scottish golfballs. And what, the book demanded, ever happened to the Picts, who in ancient times were always mentioned in tandem with the Scots? Fyfe offered solid evidence that the very first golfballs were the shrunken heads of the Scots' vanished neighbors.

Two angry expeditions from the University of Edinburgh, intent on disproving Fyfe's conclusions, vanished into the Panama jungles without a trace.

Canada's large Scottish community was quick to mount its own expedition. RCMP Staff Sergeant Angus MacDougal requested a leave of absence to lead the party. One day in the locker room, Bullock, who genuinely liked the man, tried to argue him out of going. As MacDougal listened to Bullock's story, the wrinkles puckered around his twinkling eyes and his face grew red from suppressed laughter. No, MacDougal wouldn't be dissuaded.

Afterward, Bullock remembered thinking how it had been like trying to talk sense to the toggle on a zipper pull.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

What writer had the longest time gap between first and second mystery novels? The 47 years between C. P. Snow's *Death Under Sail* (1932) and *A Coat of Varnish* (1979) would be tough to beat, though at least some of the mainstream novels he published in between had at least elements of crime and detection. Mary McMullen, who won an Edgar for *Stranglehold* (1951), fell silent 23 years until the publication of *The Doom Campaign* (1974). In a more recent and equally welcome comeback, James E. Martin, an Ohio policeman who published his first novel—a good procedural called *The 95 File*—in 1973, has returned with a second and even better book sixteen years later.

**** James E. Martin: *The Mercy Trap,* Putnam, $16.95. Cleveland private eye (and laid-off cop) Gilbert Desbro is employed by a wealthy Shaker Heights couple to find the mother of their adopted daughter, who desperately needs a kidney transplant from a compatible donor. Desbro is a striking new character, sensitive and caring in the Lew Archer mold but proudly right-wing in his political and social views. He is a militant smoker, non-registerer of firearms, and scoffer at seatbelts. His first case is an immensely readable and well written novel, with vivid characters and a generously clued puzzle. The closing chapters embody at least three plot elements familiar from many decades of use in detective fiction, but Martin has deployed these hoary devices expertly.

**** Charles Lachman: *In the Name of the Law,* St. Martin's, $15.95. Here is an exceptional first novel that deserves a long look from the Edgar committee. The central mystery is the main character, New York ambulance-chaser Jimmy Janos, who steps in on the arraignment of three members of the Sick Assassins gang and takes over their defense on a double murder charge. Janos' legal manipulations are fascinating, but readers won't root for him as they did for Perry Mason.

**** Reginald Hill: *There Are No Ghosts in the Soviet Union,* Foul Play/Countryman, $16.95. In any attempt at the impossible task of selecting the very best active crime-fiction writer, Hill would at least be in the hunt. Certainly he is among the most versatile and original, as this collection of a half dozen short stories and novelets demonstrates. In the lead tale, Moscow cop Lev Chislenko is under pressure to prove the claim of the title when he investigates the apparent vanishing of a man through the floor of an elevator. In "Auteur Theory," with a structure reminiscent of the screen version of *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* the actor-narrator is starring in a film of one of Hill's novels about Dalziel

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and Pascoe. Other stories involve a black British private eye hired to find a missing cat and a soldier training for combat action in France during World War I. All challenging, no two alike.

*** Joan Hess: *A Really Cute Corpse,* St. Martin's, $14.95. Book dealer Claire Malloy, a professed feminist, seems an unlikely candidate to co-direct a local beauty pageant, but she steps in to help an injured friend. Claire's narrative, from the Erma Bombeck school of mystery writing, is witty and bright; the satire of beauty contests pointed and funny; and the whodunit plot (initially involving several apparent attempts on the life of the reigning Miss Thurberfest) well conceived and executed.

*** Sister Carol Anne O'Marie: *The Missing Madonna,* Delacorte, $15.95. Sister Mary Helen of San Francisco's Mount St. Francis College is not the only nun-detective in fiction, but her creator is probably the only nun-mystery writer. In their third case, Mary Helen and her Irish Watson, Sister Eileen, look into the disappearance of a fellow member of the OWLs (Older Women's League). A charming book, notable for the San Francisco background, nuggets of wit and wisdom, well developed and likeable characters, and a smooth readability. If the plot is a bit slight, that's a common and forgivable failing of religious mysteries.

*** Howard Engel: *A Victim Must Be Found,* St. Martin's, $16.95. Benny Cooperman, softboiled private eye of Grantham, Ontario, is hired by a Greek hotel manager to retrieve a list of names of prominent citizens who had been loaned paintings by a recently deceased art dealer. A complicated plot ensues, but the strong suit of this series is character and style. Engel's touch with vivid and thorough scene-setting reminds me of writers as otherwise different as P. D. James and Aaron Marc Stein.

*** Ellis Peters: *The Confession of Brother Haluin,* Mysterious, $15.95. The fifteenth novel about Brother Cadfael is a bit too guessable to rank with the medieval sleuth's best adventures, but the background and character drawing are strong as ever. Peters' prose style, appropriate to the period, has a poetic rhythm to it.

** Tom Seaver with Herb Resnicow: *Beanball,* Morrow, $16.96. This one is not for everybody. You have to be devoted both to Seaver's specialty of baseball, knowledgably covered both in coaching-strategy sessions and detailed descriptions of game action, and to Resnicow's of Golden Age-style detection, though the plot here is thinner than in his solo efforts. Investigating the murder of the owner of the Brooklyn Bandits (who somehow got in the World Series despite the boss's Steinbrennerlike interference) is sports columnist Marcus Aurelius Burr, who earlier appeared in *Murder at the Super Bowl* (1986), on which Resnicow's collaborator was Fran Tarkenton.

** William J. Reynolds: *Things Invisible,* Putnam, $17.95. By the seventh page, Nebraska had shot to the top of my list of most irritating smartass private eyes. (He

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says stuff like, "But us down-these-mean-streets guys work best solo.") Despite the self-indulgent narrator, Reynolds has a good story to tell, starting with that hardboiled staple, the wandering daughter. But most readers will anticipate the solution several pages before the Omaha op.

** Jesse Sublett: *Rock Critic Murders,* Viking, $16.95. Best features of this first novel about Austin bassist and skiptracer Martin Fender are the well observed rock-music background and some patches of effective narrative and humor. Worst feature is the uninvolving plot, concerning cocaine dealing among other sins.

** Joe Gores: *Wolf Time,* Putnam, $17.95. Triple Edgar-winner Gores has combined high quality with relatively low production (eight novels over 21 years) to make each new book an event. His latest, though, misfires. The first half, despite an overabundance of intrusive hunting flashbacks, promises much, but the second bogs down badly, with the whodunit aspect sacrificed and some questionable motivation on the part of the female lead. The account of Presidential candidate Gary Westergard's campaign (opposing incumbent VP George Arbor) proves much more diverting than the painful activities of outdoorsman Hollis Fletcher, who survives a murder attempt and seeks revenge.

A pair of audiocassettes from American Audio Prose Library, Inc. (P. O. Box 842, Columbia, MO 65205) offer a chance to meet Joe Gores in better form, with a meaty 53-minute interview, touching on his experiences as real-life private eye and screenwriter, and a 36-minute reading, including an action excerpt from *Hammett* and the full text of his Edgar-winning *EQMM* story "Goodbye, Pops." Not all authors are effective readers of their work, but Gores certainly is. The interview and reading are offered at $14.45 each, the set for $25.00.

Published by Caedmon but also available from American Audio Prose Library is Tony Hillerman's distinctive reading of a three-hour abridgement of his most recent novel, *A Thief of Time* (2 cassettes, $17.95), reviewed in this space in February.

Still another alternative for gridlocked commuters: vintage radio shows, such as the two 1946 Sherlock Holmes adventures with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce offered as *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Simon and Schuster, $9.95). "The April Fool's Day Adventure" and "The Strange Adventure of the Uneasy Chair," well plotted originals by Denis Green and Anthony Boucher, come complete with Petri wine commercials and some present-day reminiscences by Mary Green, widow of scripter Denis.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

"Walk out on me and I'll find you," Robbie had told her, flicking her throat with the blade of the drab, ugly knife. "First you, then me—we'll die together and be together always. Know it, Judy—that's how it'll be."

She knew it. Some things you know. If he killed her, the filth of him would carry into her on his knife and she would be diseased and damned. No clean place for her then, but the place of endless and eternal garbage and slime, Robbie beside her, smirking and giggling, at home in filth, touching it on her. Forever . . .

THE CLEAN PLACE

by ROBERT TWOHY

The woman asked the young man if he was afraid of heights. He said no. She said she wasn't particularly, either, but standing on a stool with both arms stretched up made her dizzy.

He looked like he didn't know what the remark meant. They had just introduced themselves. He was eighteen, dark and slight, a messenger in the law office where she worked as a phone operator. She was early thirties, nice-looking, with light-brown hair. She was wearing a tan blouse, slacks, sandals, and had a brown handbag. He wore a dark suit and a blue tie.

She said that two days ago she had gotten up on a stool to replace a bulb in her overhead fixture and got dizzy and fell, luckily not landing on her head or face but getting a big bruise. Fingertips slowly circled the left hip that was to him, and her brown eyes were wide and her lips a little apart.

They were in the coffee shop under the powerful building on Montgomery Street where they worked in a suite on the fourth floor. The

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firm picked mostly bright young law students for the easy, low-paid messenger jobs. He was a night student at State, out on Nineteenth, who at his interview three weeks ago had stated that his aim was to be a lawyer like his father, deceased, who had practiced in Portland, Oregon. He had been raised there and his mother lived there. They liked his looks and his quiet, respectful manner and hired him.

The phone desk gave a view of the door behind which the messengers—eight when all there, all young men—sat around a long table studying, writing letters, arguing, joking, or dozing as they waited for one of the fourteen partners to signal by phone that he or she—two were women—wanted a document or note run somewhere or picked up. Some days they were all rushing around and others they mostly sat.

A few minutes before rubbing her hip, she had seen him come out of the room and head not past her down the corridor to a lawyer's office or the men's room, but out the door. She had observed him go on breaks before, but always with another or several colleagues. This was the first time he had departed alone for coffee, if he had, which she was pretty sure, as shortly before he had come back from a run and nobody had left the room after he had. So he would be last out, the time to go for coffee.

At 2:37 this Tuesday afternoon in April, the phones weren't ringing and no important calls were scheduled out. Alice, the other operator, was reading *Redbook*. The brown-haired woman announced that she would take her break now, got her handbag, and left.

In the coffee shop, the young man was at the counter and a few others were perched along it, none she knew. He became aware that someone was lingering by him, shot a glance, and, recognizing her, got on an uncertain smile. With a murmured "May I?" she slid onto the perch to his right.

The old woman brought her coffee and she nodded at the young man's nearly empty cup, and the woman refilled it. The phone operator told him her name was Judy Baines and he said he was Jim Coyle, which she knew, and offered fingers that he took. After a pause and a sip or so, she told of her fall from the stool two days before, and noted his dark, long-lashed eyes watching her fingertips trail around her hip.

The day after he was hired, she learned his name and other facts about him from Bernina, one of the file clerks. She and Bernina and Alice were at a table in the coffee shop. Bernina and Alice agreed

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that he was prime new stuff, but a woman could lose her job for sexual harassment of a juvenile, the firm being gloomy about sex and anything else that was fun. Judy Baines smiled at their silliness and thought her own thoughts.

Jim Coyle resembled an actor who had hit her very hard years ago when she saw him on the late-late show in an ancient movie, a period piece supposedly explaining the great Chicago Fire. He was beautiful, but what hit her was a rare look of understanding and kindness in his dark rich eyes—she sensed a giver, not a taker.

She asked about him and learned that he had died years ago. She hoped that he hadn't lost that look and become warped and corrupted in the torrent of slime and garbage the world rains down. Then she saw him in films made later and he still had the look. She was glad, and sure that he had got through his life unspoiled, and gone to the place the clean go—where she longed to end up and would, if Robbie Gill didn't catch up with her.

Jim Coyle moved precisely and gracefully, like the actor—not effeminate but completely different from the lunging or hectic moves of other men his age. He had straight black hair and brows that put a shadow on his eyes, making them larger and darker behind their long lashes. She saw in them the beginning of the rare look that the actor had had.

He wore usually the neat dark suit, though sometimes a grey suit. His voice was low and not sure. She thought that in ten years he would know himself and men would be aware of him and many women would have loved him. He would be launched on a good and decent career, and if still alive she would see his photo in the paper or his image on TV and think of him, and remember—what?

Whatever would be to remember.

She had come to San Francisco a year ago, leaving Kansas City suddenly, having heard that Robbie Gill was in town. He owned a short, wide-bladed knife with a square grey handle. She had had dreams of that knife, his wiry hand around it, and in the dreams had heard the words he had said a dozen times to her in North Platte—*You and me, Judy, forever. Walk out on me and I'll find you,* flicking her throat with the blade of the drab, ugly knife. *First you, then me—we'll die together and be together always. Know it, Judy—that's how it'll be.*

She knew it. Some things you know. If he killed her, the rest would follow. The filth of him would carry into her on his knife and she would be diseased and damned. No clean place for her then, but

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the place of endless and eternal garbage and slime, Robbie beside her, smirking and giggling, at home in filth, touching it on her. Forever.

She was a giver. Before Robbie, many men had had the gift of her, and in Kansas City she had given. But in San Francisco she had lived quietly and stayed out of the type places she had always gone to find men to give herself to. She was certain that one day Robbie would come to San Francisco, if not here already. He would search low bars and in his sly way ask about her. She made sure she wouldn't be known by staying clear.

Watching young Jim Coyle watch her hand slowly rotating around her hip, she wondered if he was a virgin. She supposed not, but it was possible. In his eyes she saw no gleam that he was rating her against other women who had made a play for him—or even that he was aware that was what she was doing. She doubted he saw that her fear of overhead fixtures was a fiction meant to be seen through.

Seeing him pass in and out of the messengers' room, the need to give, held down for a year and more, had surged up in her. It struck her that for the first and maybe last time in her life, here was a man to share with.

Leaving off her hip, she sipped coffee and murmured, "You get used to reading by dim light." Which made no sense as you don't read by an overhead light, you turn on a lamp—but sense can be suspended sometimes and she felt this was a time.

He said in his low voice, "That's hard on the eyes."

She made them small and stressful. "Better that than fall off the stool and next time cut my face, maybe have a permanent scar."

"No need of that." He frowned like sensing a situation calling for a man's leadership. She blinked, like not fully understanding but willing to. He said, "I'd put it in for you." His dark gaze was without guile or innuendo.

She slumped a little, sighed. "I can't ask you to do that. I live way out in Colma." From Bernina she knew he lived in a rooming house on Warner Street in Daly City, the town abutting San Francisco on the south. Colma abuts Daly City.

He said he lived on Warner Street in Daly City, south of the Hill, so they were nearly neighbors. She was pleasedly surprised. He said he'd come over and replace the light tonight if she wanted, or any other night he didn't have a class.

"You don't have a class tonight?"

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No, he didn't.

They gazed at each other over their cups and her eyes were wide and clear and showed no stress. He said somewhat chokily, "You have pretty eyes," like it wasn't easy to say but he said it.

He moved differently from other young men, and his voice would firm and his gaze become wise and kind and full of tender understanding of women. He would receive from many women and would give. A giver knows another. When she was long in his past, her gifts would be in him.

"If you come, you have to stay for dinner. I won't let you come otherwise."

"If I can bring something."

"Bring some—nuts." She had been about to say wine, but he would be embarrassed to have his youth and consequent inadequacy as a wine-provider put in the open.

At thirty-two she was right for him, a virgin or almost so, which wasn't the point but not completely off it. If a virgin, he'd remember her, and if not quite, her gift would be part of the making of him, and seeing his image or hearing of him later she would be quietly proud.

She asked if he liked wine. He said he didn't drink much, but a little wine sometimes was nice. She inquired as to his feelings about spaghetti, and he said he liked it. He asked what kind of nuts she liked. Cashews, she said, and he said he did, too.

From her bag she got a pad and wrote her address in Colma. He studied it. "That's behind the cemeteries on the north edge, isn't it?" The length of Colma along El Camino is cemeteries east and west—all creeds, nationalities, and combinations. A clutch of residential streets is behind the northwest edge of them. She nodded that her street was among them. He slid the slip into his breast pocket. "I'm only about eight blocks, so I won't have to take a bus. I don't like buses, I prefer walking."

He asked what time. She said, "Seven-thirty?" A swift glance around spotted no one she knew paying attention. She murmured, "People gossip. You being kind and offering to fix my bulb, and our having a simple meal together—if they hear about it in the office, so will we."

"I never talk about my personal life."

"That's best." They had things in common, like an affection for spaghetti, cashews and a little wine, and reluctance to talk personally in the office.

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He laid a dollar bill and change on the counter, as his male privilege. She nodded acknowledgment and they proceeded to the elevators, where waited a man with a briefcase and a frown like time is money. They didn't speak, all having been said.

On four, she walked ahead to the doors of the suite, paused to send a smile over her shoulder, and went to take and make calls until 5:00.

At one minute past, he came out of the messengers' room with a loud young man who talked and gestured. Jim Coyle didn't glance toward the phone desk. If he had, she would have glanced elsewhere.

Five minutes later she was clipping south on Montgomery, and four blocks later waited for the 5L, which toiled through homebound congestion out Mission, breaking clear a little before her stop on the cusp of Colma.

At Regina's Deli she got a carton of spaghetti with mushrooms, half a loaf of garlic bread, parmesan, a bottle of chianti, and an artichoke salad. Two blocks west and a block south was her building, like every other on the block, frame four-unit apartments put up in one fast swoop thirty years ago.

She was on the second floor. The unit across was currently vacant. She rarely saw the residents at the far end or the ones downstairs. You can live in a metropolis or on the edge of it and no one sees or hears you or knows anything about you or who comes visiting.

In her studio was still daylight through the windows. She put her handbag on the bureau and the sack of food and wine on the counter to the kitchenette. At the closet she hung up her jacket and kicked off her sandals, and went to fix dinner.

The salad went into a bowl and into the refrigerator. She lined a square pan with foil and the spaghetti went into it, then into the oven to wait with the foil-wrapped bread. The parmesan and the wine bottle stayed on the counter. The empty cartons got pushed into the trashbag. It was 6:38.

Her bed down the room, its foot three feet from the end wall and its far side three feet from the window wall, needed making. She had got out of the habit of sheets, using just a mat under her, two pillows piled, and blankets. But pink sheets were on a closet shelf and pink pillowslips. In a few minutes the bed was made with a yellow flower spread over it.

She went around the studio, picking up a few things that went into the closet or drawers or the wastebasket. Turning on the ther-

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mostat, she shed her clothes, hung her slacks with the jacket, and dumped the rest in the laundry bag. She went into the bathroom and showered.

Damp-dry, she got from the closet a light-green sleeveless dress with a scoop neck and the slippers that matched. From the bureau came fresh underthings, and from the jewelry box the thin silver necklace and silver pips for her ears.

In the bathroom she dabbed on some restrained perfume, made up her lips and eyes, and put on the jewelry. She smoothed her hair. Dressed, she turned this way and that before the half-length mirror, liking what she saw, and thinking how Jim Coyle would be confused and uncertain, as a young man should be at the look and scent of a pretty older woman as he'd never seen her at the office.

It had got fairly dark. She went to the kitchenette and turned on the overhead light there, which lit the studio dimly. She got middle-length green candles from a drawer by the oven and put them into silvered holders. She lay a green-white cloth on the little square table and set it with cutlery, napkins, salt and pepper, parmesan, and the candles. She got two wine glasses, two plates, and two salad bowls ready on the counter.

The record player by the short couch beyond the door had a blown tube or something. She knelt and turned on the radio under the low table in front of the couch to the station that played old-style dance music with little talk, making it low.

It was 7:20. She turned on the oven to 250.

In the bathroom for a final survey, she moved a stray tress or two where they belonged, then went to the sofa and sat with hands in her lap, humming along to the soft music as she waited, feeling in harmony with herself, her surroundings, and the night ahead.

At 7:37 sounded the scratchy clicking that was the defective door-chime.

He wore a grey jacket and a gold-brown shirt and brown slacks and shoes, and carried a small white sack. Dark eyes sprang wide and he swallowed, and she was pleased that he was discomposed, as a young man with little or no experience of an older or maybe any woman should be.

He said in his low, uncertain voice, "I have the nuts—and some coffee ice cream because I thought you might like it."

Saying that coffee was her favorite, she took the bag and set the pint of quality ice cream in the freezer, then handed him the can of

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cashews to pull the ziptop as she got a glass bowl, which she held for him to fill. She gave him the wine bottle to unscrew and with the nut bowl and the two glasses went to the couch, putting them on the low table.

He put the unscrewed bottle by them and looked up and said, "That's the fixture." She smiled and watched him go to the wall switch and flip it. Light flooded the studio.

He stared and she shrugged. "I guess it's all right, after all." He licked his lips and his eyes had a look like not completely surprised, like he'd had the edge of a notion that the light might light. His smile was of a young man just a little wiser about women. He flipped the switch, and they again had the dim kitchen light that made the old and somewhat tacky furniture a little softer and subtler.

From the couch she looked at him expectantly, and he came and sat by her. The music was soft.

Her hands were in her lap and her feet neatly beside each other. He sat straight and his eyes were dark and shining with lack of knowledge of what the next move would be, a little scared but glad to be here. His lashes were long.

She asked what courses he was taking at State and he told her. She talked quietly and they sipped their wine that she had waited until he poured. She asked where he was from and they talked about Portland, where she had stopped once on a train and remembered the river. He said that when he was little he used to swim in the river. He said Oregon was beautiful and green, but wet. They ate cashews. She pushed her empty glass a little and he refilled it, and his. His shoulders, turned to her, weren't stiff as they had been and his voice was surer.

After the second glass, she got up and held out her hand, which he took, and she sat him at the little table. They had brought their glasses. She asked if he would like to take off his jacket, and he did. She put it on the edge of the couch, coming back with the bottle. She lit the candles and switched off the light and they ate and drank in the candlelight, saying not much. Now and then she would catch his eyes and hold them until he'd lick his lips or swallow and look away. But each time he let them be held a little longer.

They finished. She put the dishes and utensils in the sink and asked if he wanted ice cream. He said no. There was still wine in the bottle but she had had enough and just right, and judged he had, too.

She carried the two lit candles to the couch table. He came to sit,

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but she took his hand and led him to the bed, sitting him and leaning softly into him so he went slowly on his back, feet on the floor.

She sort of curled into him and put her hand on his cheek and gazed down at him. He put his hand to her face and the music was soft in the candlelight.

His fingers stroked down her throat, then stilled. "I feel your heartbeat."

"Yes. It beats close there."

"That's the carotid artery. I learned that in anatomy."

Into her head jumped Robbie's hand and his grey knife and she heard his whisper, *You and me, Judy—together always.*

She had gone stiff and Jim pulled his hand from her throat and said anxiously, "What? What did I—?"

"Nothing." She took his fingers back to her heartbeat directly. "An old bad memory."

Later he was in the bathroom. He had come not prepared, but in a bathroom drawer was what was wanted. She had the flower spread off the bed which she had opened, and her gift-wrapping was on the floor.

She stood waiting. He came out and set his clothes carefully on the couch, shoes under, and was slim and beautiful and yearning. And she would lie in his arms and be worthy, as he was of her, as had never been before.

He said, "You don't have a bruise there."

"Sometimes I lie a little, if it's a good cause."

He came smiling for the gift of hers.

Which was for the right person for the first time in her life, and later was right again. It was so right that she knew that it could and should never be again. Some things you know. She felt a thump in her chest that was joy.

It was later. She was awake. She looked at his sleeping face and slid out quietly on the window side of the bed. The candles were long burned out, light of the night was through the windows. It was past 3:30.

From the closet she got her robe and tied it on. She went in the kitchenette and, turning on the light, quietly did the dishes and pans and cutlery, putting them in their places. She brushed crumbs from the tablecloth and napkins and folded them in their drawer.

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She had set the capped wine bottle and the can of parmesan on shelves.

From the trashbag she got the cashew can, wiped it with a damp rag from the sink, and poked it back in. She took the ice-cream carton, wiped it, and put it back.

At the door she looked down the dim and silent hall. She wiped the outside handle and the chime button, and around them, then closed the door silently.

She glanced and he still slept.

She did the inside knob and the wood around, and the wood parts of the couch and then the surface of the low table and his side of the kitchen table and his chair.

In the bathroom she wiped handles and knobs and the sink and toilet and the walls around.

Up in the mirror jumped the grey knife with Robbie's hand.

His voice sounded, *You and me, Judy*— She thought, firm and clear, No, Robbie. Not now and never.

The knife was gone and his voice didn't sound. She knew, as you know things, that wherever he was he heard her and knew as she did that it was over, that he wouldn't have her.

From the cutlery drawer she took a small paring knife, clean and to an honest point, and gazed at it. She tore a paper towel from the roll and folded it around the doorknob to the hall, crimping it so it stayed.

She got notepaper and a ballpoint, and at the kitchen table wrote in her neat hand for a few minutes. Folding the note, she put it under the coffee pot so most of it showed.

She walked around the far side of the bed and reached under the bottom corner of her pillow. She went around the bed and sat on his side, gazing down at him.

In a little while he frowned and moved his head, and his eyes opened, confused and unfocused, seeking reality, finding her face. He sighed and smiled. "It's still night."

"Yes. Just past four."

He was a man proud that he had given and received. He took her shoulders and she yielded herself down to him, then gently pushed and sat back with her hands in her lap and her bare feet neatly beside each other, gazing at him.

He was up on his elbow, watching her. He seemed to sense that this would be a new act in their drama of love that would be different

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from the previous acts and, not knowing his part, said nothing, waiting.

She said, "We have a gift still for each other." He opened his lips and she put fingers to them. "Just listen." Taking his passive left hand, she turned it to feel the side of her throat. "Do you feel my heart?"

"Yes."

"Is it strong and steady?" He nodded. She put his hand down. Her eyes were still and deep and her tone was low, stroking. "Know that you are my love. I've been your lover, maybe your first, and now I'll be your mother. There's pain and blood, but that's forgotten quickly. The mother is fulfilled and the child begins the future. I'm your mother and you're mine."

Totally lost, he said nothing.

"Dress, don't touch anything, turn the knob and take the paper around it, pull the door shut with the paper, and walk home. If someone sees you, they will, but if complications come they'll pass. And you'll go on to your life, and be a decent and giving person. Givers have to learn to receive—so you'll receive my gift and I'll receive yours."

She stood up, leaned to put a hand firmly behind his shoulder. He swung his legs clear of the blankets and came up with her hand and was sitting on the bed, young and fine in the dim light from the kitchen. She sat beside him on his left and said quietly, "Know that I love you and don't be afraid." She put her lips to his, soft like a mother, or a child to a mother. She felt glowing and beautiful if never before, mother and child in one.

His eyes were wide with alarm, but he didn't know his part and would follow her. She put fingers to his eyelids and he closed them. She reached her right hand behind them to the near corner of her pillow and under it, then brought her hands together.

Shifting so she was turned from him, she moved her tail into his left hip and leaned back against him, brown hair under his chin. "Are your eyes still closed?"

"Yes."

"Give me your hand."

His right hand came around her waist. Taking it in her left, she laid it over her right, holding it there. "Be brave and know that this is the beginning," she said to them both.

Bending from him and raising her chin, she moved their three hands until she felt the point of the clean knife on her throat to the

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right. She let it move a little, sure it would find what it sought if she let it.

It stopped and stayed. Squeezing the three hands hard, she drove the point into the artery, ripping sideward as she threw his hand away and bumped him so that he lunged for balance away from her. Picking up her legs, she fell to her left in a huddle, pouring into the blanket her blood, which would be in him but not on him as he walked home in the dark morning.

She was going on and going on very fast through the pain and joy like never before, leaving the small huddled scrap on the bed. Had to be this night gift of love, Robbie, no more fear no more pain—now green around soft green such peace so happy the clean place clean place clean—

It was one of a number of violent deaths in the City and environs that April night, not discovered until Saturday but known to have happened Wednesday morning about 4:00 because that's how the note was headed.

Saturday morning, Alice and Bernina came by, getting no response at her door.

But Alice, after the second try, had the face of a woman who smells something wrong, literally. They found out the realty firm in charge of the place and got a man to come with a key.

Police found the note in her careful hand: "I did this with my clean knife and no one hurt me or was involved. I have gone to the clean place and am full of joy. Judy Baines."

In Monday's paper was a brief mention, giving her name, age, and occupation, without naming her firm, and stating that she had left a note and police were satisfied.

Jim Coyle, calling in with flu early Wednesday, didn't return to work until Monday. That day and Tuesday, the messengers were full of conjecture as to why the brown-haired phone woman had killed herself, finally deciding it was a love affair gone sour. They lapsed into humor of a sort, asking each other, "Was it you?" "Were you carrying on with her under our nose?" "Did you dump her?" "Are you the one?"

They didn't include Jim Coyle, youngest and newest and not of the gang yet, if he ever would be. The heavy joking went on around him and he smiled a little and didn't say anything. By Friday they had forgotten how she had died or that she had ever existed as they

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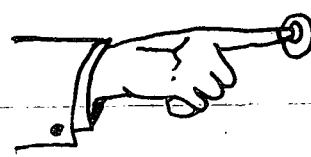
jabbered about the new phone girl, young and shapely, really prime material.

Jim Coyle didn't forget that April night in Colma, which when older he worked out its meaning: that for the start of her journey she needed his hand in hers on the liberating knife. Her blood was the gift they would share, as they had shared others that night, which she trusted he would understand in time.

Ten years later, see him as a young lawyer, able and caring, a giver and receiver of love. See Judy's good smile.



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a delightful reprint by

JACK RITCHIE

St. Martin's recently published a collection of Jack Ritchie stories, Little Boxes of Bewilderment, *edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., who is putting together another collection of Mr. Ritchie's unique and wonderful stories. One to be included in the later collection (originally published in* Woman's World *) is . . .*

THIS GUN FOR HIRE

by JACK RITCHIE

As all of my victims are, George Franklin was considerably surprised and shocked to see me sitting there in one of his armchairs holding the automatic.

He glanced at the wall light-switch still at his fingertips, wondering, perhaps, whether if he flipped the switch back to "off" I might disappear.

I indicated another armchair. "Please come in and close the door behind you. Sit down."

He did as he was told and then asked the first pertinent question. "What is this? A robbery?"

I smiled. "No, this is not a robbery."

He hesitated to take another guess, so I filled him in.

"I am here to kill you," I said.

He exhibited predictable shock. "Kill me? But why? I've never seen you before in my life."

I allowed another smile. "Actually, I don't particularly want to kill you. I have nothing against you personally. I regard this merely as a matter of business. I'm simply doing a job for which I was hired."

His eyes were wide. "You're a *professional* killer?"

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I nodded.

Franklin licked his lips. "Who hired you? My wife?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Would she want you dead?"

He considered the question. "Well, we don't get along too well, but still I think it's going a little too far to—"

"It's not your wife."

He made another try. "That damn son-in-law of mine? He'd like to see me dead. I'll bet you anything."

I sighed. "Far be it from me to create dissension or suspicion within a family. No, the individual who commissioned me is not from your immediate family—or, as far as I'm aware, even a distant relative."

"Then who hired you?"

"I can't give you his name. A matter of professional ethics, you know. But, believe me, it's of no consequence. It's possible you don't even remember him. After all, it goes back a number of years."

He frowned, seemingly scanning his past for clues.

I, of course, always do considerable research about my victims before I finally choose to confront them. So there was very little I couldn't tell you about this man.

George Channing Franklin deals in large-lot real estate—suburban developments and the like. During the course of the years, his name has appeared frequently in the newspapers, never with laudatory intent. He has been indicted three times for questionable practices, including the bribery of public officials. But for all the accusations, he has yet to spend a day in jail.

I smiled again. "I do meet some rather strange people in my profession. People who carry grudges for years and years, and then suddenly feel the need to 'express' themselves. Or possibly it's just that they've never had the opportunity to meet someone like me before. I help them express desires long buried."

Franklin scowled at me. "Swenson? Is that who it is? There was nothing illegal in what I did. It was business. He took his chances and I took mine."

"No. It's not Swenson."

"McClintock? He doesn't have a cent more coming to him. He was lucky I gave him that five grand out of the goodness of my heart."

I held up a hand. "I don't intend to let you take me on a tour through your list of enemies. I simply will not reveal the identity of my employer. Nothing you say will make me change my mind."

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That path being closed, he now tried another. "How much—how much did this unknown person pay you to kill me?"

I shrugged. "I suppose it won't do any harm to tell you. Five thousand dollars."

His jaw dropped. "Five thousand? A lousy five thousand dollars?"

I regarded him archly. "My dear sir, five thousand dollars may be lousy to you, but I assure you it is not lousy to me."

He quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to insult you. I just meant why settle for five thousand dollars when you can make double that?"

"Double?"

Now he smiled for the first time. "Suppose I gave you ten thousand dollars not to kill me?"

I regarded the offer and rubbed my jaw. "There is the matter of ethics. I made a bargain. I gave my word."

"In cash," he said swiftly. He went to the wall and pushed aside a painting to reveal a wall safe. He began dialing. "I've got the money in my safe. In my business you sometimes find that you need ready cash for emergencies."

He pulled an envelope out of the safe and emptied its contents on the cocktail table in front of me. "Ten thousand. Count it."

I counted the bills and, sure enough, there were one hundred one-hundred-dollar bills in the stack. While I was counting, I was also thinking.

When I was finished, I stared at the money and then sighed. I put the bills back into the envelope and the envelope into the pocket of my suit jacket.

Franklin rubbed his hands. "Now maybe you'll tell me who hired you."

I shook my head. "Sir, you bought your life. But no amount of money will draw the name of my client out of me. After all, I do still have some sense of ethics left."

He studied me. "But that leaves me with a problem."

"Problem? What problem?"

"What's to prevent this unnamed client of yours from hiring someone else to kill me?"

I thought about that. "Nothing, really."

He went back to the safe and returned with another fat envelope.

Just how many of those envelopes did he have in that safe, I wondered. For a moment I was tempted to find out, but then I changed my mind. It just wasn't my style.

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"Ten thousand more," Franklin said. "Keep your ethics. I don't need his name. But if this mystery man can hire you to kill me, why can't I hire you to kill him? I mean, fair is fair, isn't it? And I pay more. A lot more."

I sighed heavily and slipped the second envelope into my pocket. "I assure you that if I didn't need the money so badly, I wouldn't for one moment consider—"

"Sure," he said, not waiting for me to finish. "Sure."

I put my automatic on the small table next to me and rose to slip back into my topcoat.

Franklin's hand moved swiftly. In a flash he had seized the gun, and now he pointed it at me.

My heart began to race, but then I quickly pulled myself together and smiled faintly. "That was awfully careless of me."

He agreed. "How does it feel to have the gun pointing at you for a change?"

Yes, I thought, one must admit there's quite a difference between pointing and being pointed at.

"Sit down," he commanded.

I debated the order for a moment and then decided to sit.

"I could shoot you right where you are. I don't think I'd have any trouble explaining to the police."

I sat there as the seconds ticked away, wondering if he really would pull the trigger. "Suppose you do kill me—wouldn't that be quite counterproductive? My death would still leave someone out there who wants to kill you enough to pay for it. He will simply hire someone else who might not give you the opportunity to negotiate."

That reminded him and he tried again. "All right, who hired you to kill me?"

I smiled thinly. "Even under the circumstances, my lips are sealed."

He studied me for a few moments. "I've been thinking things over. You might be just the kind of person I've been looking for all my life. Money can buy a lot of people, but not all of them. Here and there I meet someone who gets in the way, if you know what I mean. Yes, I think you might help me. I'll pay twenty thousand each job. I think that's generous."

I indicated the gun he held. "Then why are you still pointing that thing at me?"

He dismissed the situation. "Just a reflex action. I saw the gun

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lying there and so I grabbed it." He handed the automatic back to me. "Where can I get in touch with you when I need you?"

"I'll get in touch with you. Whenever you're ready to do business, simply insert an item in the personal column of the newspaper: *All is forgiven, come home, Ralph.* I'll make contact with you immediately after the item appears."

When I returned to my hotel, I slipped the automatic back into my suitcase. Having it on my person made me nervous, even though I knew it wasn't loaded.

I smiled in guilty embarrassment. Knowing it was unloaded had accounted for my coolness when the gun was pointed at me. I wondered for a moment how I would have reacted if the weapon had contained cartridges—rather badly, I'm afraid. I'm not at all a brave man, though I did rather enjoy playing the role. And I would never answer that silly ad in the personal column should Franklin ever care to insert it.

As a matter of fact, I would leave town immediately. I have no wish even to be in the same city with a man as ruthless as Franklin. I have never murdered anyone in my life and I have no intention of ever doing so. However, in this uncertain world, one must turn a dollar to keep body and soul together, and there is in the process more than one way to skin a cat—or fleece a sheep. And I felt that some sheep like Franklin did justly deserve to be fleeced.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

FOILED!

by JACK LEAVITT

I sealed the room to foil the law
The night Sir Henry died,
But Scotland Yard found one small flaw—
I'd locked myself inside.

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a *NEW* short story by

THOMAS ADCOCK

"Mike, where've you gone?" Franny said.

This was a private joke between them. The question meant, What are you thinking? And since he thought about it so much—since it worried him so terribly—he'd eventually just have to ask her straight out. Maybe tonight . . .

WHO GIVES THIS BRIDE?

by THOMAS ADCOCK

It was a sweltering August night. The slanty old shingle-sided house, wedged desolately between a vacant lot and a junkyard, was unbearably warm. And so Mike and Franny sat out on the front-porch steps where it was cooler, though not by much. But they could see the dingy stars up in the hot sky and this helped take their minds off their unspoken fears. And now and then they would see fireflies. When you saw a firefly, you were supposed to make a wish.

Franny lifted her head from Mike's shoulder. "There's another one." Mike knew that her eyes were shut tight and she was concentrating on her wish. Then she leaned against him again and sighed. "I wished you and me would be rich enough and free enough to go someplace nice on a long, long trip sometime. I think it'd be real nice to travel like that, don't you?"

Why not right now? he wanted to say. Instead, he said, "I guess so, if *you'd* like it." He was bursting to tell her what worried him so badly, but it was a struggle to find the words. And it was so hot.

"Oh, Mike, I think if I spent my whole life looking, I wouldn't find a sweeter guy to marry me than you."

If he could just think of some way to lead up to it—if he could just find out.

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Franny said in a dreamy voice, "I was thinking how natural it seems that we're together, as if we knew each other all the way back to when we were kids and like we've been married for years. I know that's crazy to say since it's only been a month, but it's the way I feel."

"It's not crazy, Franny," he told her, pulling her closer. She always made him feel like a hero. And he was only a plain-looking man, big, brown-haired, and clumsy—and nobody was ever going to describe him as the smartest young guy in the town of Newburgh, either. But he'd felt like he was someone important ever since the day last April when he'd first met Franny. Sometimes he wondered if the way she made him feel was the biggest reason he loved her so, and if that wasn't sort of selfish of him.

"Mike, where've you gone?"

This was a private joke between them. The question meant, What are you thinking? And since he thought about it so much—since it worried him so terribly—he'd eventually just have to ask her straight out. Maybe tonight.

Maybe it wasn't as awful as he sometimes imagined it to be. Maybe there was an explanation that would fix it all up. And maybe she'd explain some other things, too—the things that made him so worried and fearful and suspicious of her father.

"I was thinking, Franny, that I know I act sort of cold sometimes—" He would have to say this carefully because he didn't want to make her upset or unhappy, both of which she was when the subject had come up before. "What I'm trying to say is, I know I act cold to your father. I want you to understand it's not because I don't like him or anything like that. It isn't even because I think you and me ought to be living in our own place by ourselves. It's just that I get mixed up maybe and I imagine things about him. If you could only explain a couple of things—"

Mike felt Franny separate from him even though her face never moved from his shoulder. He felt her soft yellow hair against his cheek and breathed her light perfume. He tightened his arm around her and said, "Franny?" But she didn't answer.

The crickets seemed noisier now, and the heat bore down more oppressively. He could hear the murmur of two men's voices from the open window of Papa's room directly over the front porch. One voice was that of his father-in-law, the other belonged to Nicky Maltin, who had dropped by as he did every week. They sounded as

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if they might be arguing and Mike felt vaguely ashamed of himself when he realized he was trying to eavesdrop on their conversation.

But, he told himself, he had to find out. He had to ask Franny every question he'd thought of in the month they'd been married, because, otherwise, they wouldn't have a marriage at all—not by his lights. Married people were supposed to share worries just as openly as they shared fun. They shouldn't have secrets—the way Franny did. They shouldn't act mysterious and strange.

Mike figured that first he'd have to explain all this to Franny. She was only eighteen years old, after all—probably she didn't understand life as well as he did, since he was twenty-two and when you get to be twenty-two you're supposed to begin knowing what it's all about.

"Franny," he said softly. "I'd like to tell you something—if you'd like to listen to me."

For a minute she didn't speak. Then, in a tight voice she said, "Okay."

"Well—" He put his hand on her hair and smoothed it back from where it stuck to her lightly perspiring face. He had a pain in his chest from loving her so much, and from wondering so much. Usually she understood, she understood him like nobody else ever had, and she encouraged him to tell her about how he felt. But not now. Because now she knew it was leading up to a talk about her father.

It had been like that from the very beginning. Even before they were married and Mike was talking about how he'd like to rent an apartment near Broadway, in the middle of the town—where it would be bright and clean and there would be shops nearby and they could make friends and have them over for dinner maybe, or in the evenings—she'd tell him, without looking at him as she said it, "We have to live with Papa, Mike. We can't leave Papa by himself."

"But, Franny, just for the first little while couldn't we be alone? People are supposed to live by themselves when they get married, at least at the start. I don't think your father would mind."

Her father didn't look like the kind who minded much of anything. He was meek and stoop-shouldered and his eyes were watery blue and expressionless, his hair thin and grey as cobwebs. Franny didn't look anything like him. She was two inches taller, at least, and her eyes were vivid and green and she had graceful, athletic shoulders, like a swimmer, and long muscular arms and legs. She was quick

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to smile. But her father rarely moved his mouth at all, and when he did his thin lips trembled—mostly he coughed a lot and looked as if he was waiting for someone to bawl him out about it.

The difference between him and his daughter was never more startling than the day Mike and Franny were married by the judge. Franny wore a pretty flowered dress and Mike wore a new blue suit. It was a small wedding. Mike had been raised in the county orphanage and there was only Franny and her father on the other side. Six guests were seated in the judge's little office—friends of Mike from the gravel pit where he worked as a truck driver's helper. Franny and her father had moved to Newburgh in April and she had no friends of her own as yet. When the judge asked, "Who gives this bride?" it took several seconds before the stoop-shouldered man realized this was his cue, and then it seemed unnatural when he stood up and he said, "Her father does." Then he coughed.

But Mike didn't dislike the man—there was nothing really to dislike. He just didn't want to live with him. And so he kept talking about how nice it would be if he and Franny took their own apartment. After all, Mike couldn't very well have his wife living with him in his tiny room down around the corner from the hotel where Franny and her father had taken a suite when they came to town. And the hotel suite was much too small for three—even a little too small for two.

When he'd talked about an apartment for the two of them, Franny would answer, "Oh, Mike—" And she'd say in a pleading whisper, with her eyes cast down and her blonde hair falling around her cheeks, "I've got to stay with Papa. It's important, Mike. You know I wouldn't say so if it wasn't. He has to have me with him. Please."

"But, honey—"

"Oh, please don't say no, Mike. I'll just die if you say no. It's so important!"

He could see she was frightened when she talked this way. Frightened beyond logic, frightened past thinking about how they'd have to find someplace for the three of them and the problem that would be. "Okay, Franny," he'd say.

But a few days later, when he'd again start talking about an apartment just for the two of them, the frightened look would come back into Franny's eyes and he'd drop the subject. There were more important things on the positive side to be thinking and talking about, such as how Mike and Franny had learned in their brief courtship how lonely they both were and how in their different ways

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they'd always been lonely and how they'd never been able to have many friends, even when they were kids. And how loneliness doesn't add up to memories, how they were two people who were suddenly adults but couldn't remember growing up.

Then, a few weeks before their wedding, Franny took Mike's hand one night at dinner in the hotel coffee shop where they always ate and she held it tight as she told him, "Mike, we'll have to let Papa pick out the place for us to live, the three of us together."

"Let—?"

"We've got to and that's it. Oh, honey, don't feel bad. I know he'll pick out a nice place, and we can divvy up the rent. Please."

"But, Franny, what I don't get is why?" Then he could see she was trying not to cry, and she was smiling at the same time so that he wouldn't notice the battle she was having inside of herself. And he couldn't think of anything to say but okay.

A hundred other times he'd wanted to ask questions. Like why had Franny and her father moved up from New York to Newburgh, where they didn't have family and didn't know anybody? And why did they live in that hotel suite instead of some regular place? And why did Mike have to see her only at the hotel coffee shop, or in the lobby, or maybe just outside the hotel? Why wouldn't Franny stray from the hotel or from her father? But he had blinded himself to these things, figuring once they got married things could sort themselves out.

But why had her father picked out this old shingle-sided house on this lonesome, broken-down street, with all the tired old furniture in it? With no neighbors around for blocks—just the junkyard and the vacant lot and mostly boarded-up houses and stores and a bunch of dead trees across the way that dropped down to the river and the gravel pit where Mike worked. Mike knew it was no kind of life for a young couple, but Franny didn't complain, and he didn't understand that. He'd be out all day working the truck at the gravel pit, and Papa would be gone most days, at least some of the time. And there was eighteen-year-old Franny home alone, with nothing to do but clean a mostly uncleanable dump of a place and watch TV, which she didn't much like. She was young—she ought to be out talking to people and doing things.

There were two other things Mike wanted to ask questions about. Papa always seemed to have enough money for things, but he never worked regular hours and he never talked about his work. The only

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visitor they'd ever had at the ugly house Papa had picked out for them was this Nicky Maltin character, whom Mike had never seen before in Newburgh. Maltin was about Papa's own age. He was a thick-set man full of energy, which made him seem a lot different than Papa. But like Papa, he was quiet. Maltin always visited at night, but not for supper. Along about the second time he came by, Mike had said to Franny, "Let's have a bunch of people over here some night for a party—people our own age."

But Franny had said, "Papa hates visitors." And her eyes were so sad.

All along, he'd known she was hiding something about her father. For the whole month-long marriage, living in the ugly, shingle-sided house on the crummy street, he'd tried to pretend that everything was all right so that Franny would be as happy as possible under the circumstances. But now he knew it was time to start living as a normal married couple. They would have to make friends and get some laughter in the house, and some confidence in each other because they were too young for secrets.

Besides which, Mike was pretty sure now that he knew part of what Franny had been hiding.

He made an important discovery. And it was a discovery that he couldn't keep quiet about no matter how naturally quietude came to a big simple man like he was.

Now on the front porch on the hot August night, Mike said, a little more loudly than he'd wanted to, "Franny—"

She stirred, and the porch step creaked beneath them. As she moved, Mike caught a whiff of her perfume, a phantom flower in the hot darkness. He wished he could forget everything else but this, he wished he could just tell her he loved her, maybe that was the only thing that mattered, anyway—

But it wasn't.

"Listen, honey," he began quickly, his arm tight around her. "I don't know how to say any of this and I guess almost anything I say'll come out a little wrong here and there, but I've just got to tell you something, and I want you to listen hard and stick with me—because we've got to face things together, Franny. Maybe some people would say we're just kids, but we're not and we never really were. We've both always had to face things, and we've got to face this now."

"Sure, Mike," Franny said. "I guess that's right."

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"Well, then," he went on, "I'll tell you something I found in this house, Franny. In your Papa's room, I found a gun—a revolver. It was in his closet under some things, and it was all loaded up. And I found another gun like it downstairs in the living room, inside that desk your Papa keeps locked. I had to pry open the drawer to find it, and—"

The voices of the two men, Papa and Nicky Maltin, were getting louder now, coming from the window directly over the porch roof, but Mike didn't notice that, that wasn't why he'd stopped talking. He'd stopped because Franny had started to cry. She cried very quietly, leaning against him. Mike patted her shoulder miserably, and said nothing.

Finally she raised her head and tilted her face up to his, tears tracing silver lines down her cheeks. "Oh, Mike," she whispered, "why did you have to do that? Why'd you have to snoop in Papa's room? I thought—"

"I know," he told her gently. "You thought I never suspected your papa of anything, didn't you, honey? I guess I never said anything out of respect for you, but I think I must have figured he was on the run with you or something. And I guess I tried ignoring the situation, until—well, until I found these guns in the house."

"Oh, I should have told you right off, Mike. I'm sorry I didn't. But he's my father, don't you see? I just couldn't.

"Here's the simple truth of it, Mike. Papa and that man up there with him—well, they're partners. They mostly have done burglaries, ever since I can remember—going back to when I was a little girl and it was just me and Papa after my mother died. It's not pretty, Mike."

"Just go on and tell me," he said softly.

"Well, I could have wound up in some orphanage like you did, Mike. Instead, I was able to stay with Papa. But we never had friends—we were always on the move. We must have lived everywhere in the Midwest and in the East—"

Mike said, "And Nicky Maltin was always with you?"

"Yes. He was the step-in man and Papa was the set-up man."

"What does that mean?"

"Papa was the brains and Nicky was the guts. Papa's job was to find out who had anything worth stealing in a town, which he'd know from investing money in the right way with salesmen at the insurance companies, or else the local cops and family lawyers. Then

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Nicky would do the actual bust-ins. That kind of a team, it's like printing your own money."

"So you came here to Newburgh to—"

"Not for what you're probably thinking, Mike. We came here to split off from Nicky."

Mike said, "I don't think I get that."

"Well, it goes to the other difference between Nicky Maltin and my father. Papa was always smart enough to know how to invest the money from his cuts from all his jobs over the years so he could retire while retiring was still voluntary. Nicky was the type of guy who would spend every last dime from his cut of what Papa would fence just as soon as he got the money in his hand—after which he'd be broke again and want to pull another job. The older a burglar gets, the more dangerous it is for him to work. Nicky wasn't an investing man and so he's desperate."

Mike said, "And now he's found out where you and your father live."

"Yes. I figured he might, but I hoped later rather than sooner. And well, you can see how Papa's not the healthiest man—" Franny bit her lips and rocked, like something was hurting her inside. Mike held her as the voices upstairs grew louder.

"He's been going to doctors for the past year or so," Franny said. "Everybody tells him he hasn't got much more time." She wiped her face. "Mike—what else did you find up in Papa's closet?"

Mike pictured the closet. The few clothes hanging there, the shelf over the rack. The gun he'd found under a pile of sweaters. "There was clothes, and a little strongbox that I didn't want to crack open."

Franny nodded in the dark. She looked up at the windows. "Papa and I, we heard that Nicky tried a solo job down in New York and he killed somebody. So you see why we laid so low?"

"Oh, honey—"

"That part of it doesn't affect us. Papa's always been careful to only do jobs that involve insured goods, so nobody gets hurt and nobody cares about remembering the jobs after a few years. Even so, it's a life where you can't relax and take it easy without worrying about the cops—and, worse, the people in your business who are all guts and no sense. I guess you never knew this, Mike, since Papa isn't talkative and he'd be awful mad if he knew I was saying it. But he's happy being retired and living on his investments. He knows he's going soon, but he never really hurt anybody and his

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conscience is clear—and, Mike, he's so happy I found you and that I'm maybe finally going to have a halfway normal kind of a life—"

She began crying again, and he held her carefully, smoothing back her hair. And he felt selfish again because now, of course, he could see how this whole strange and mysterious situation had worried her—and terrified her—much more than it had worried him. Poor Franny hadn't been able to pick her own breaks any more than he could living at the orphanage. When people who come up that unlucky way find themselves grown up, they can either be mad as hell about it or they can love and understand others who are like them—others with nothing from the past to hang onto. That's how she'd come to love him so quickly. Franny's father had probably kept her with him instead of putting her into an orphanage as some sort of cover for his burglary racket. He'd cheated her out of her childhood, out of friends and neighbors and fun. Mike pulled her closer and bent his head over hers. "Don't, Franny," he whispered.

He felt her stiffen, then she grabbed his arm. "Listen!"

The two voices above were perfectly distinct now. And there was a tight edge of anger in Maltin's tone that sounded as if violence was the only thing that might make it go away. "You think I'll let you get away with this retirement dodge?" Mike heard him say. "Why, you bony little rat, I could turn you in to the cops tomorrow and—"

"Yeah?" Papa coughed. "What about the guy you canceled out in New York?"

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I got my sources—just like you got your sources and you found me up here."

"You've got to help me on this one last job or I swear I'm going after your kid and her—"

"Aw, listen here, Nicky—"

"I listened to you enough!"

"Not so loud, they're going to hear you downstairs!"

Franny turned a panic-stricken face toward the sounds of a scuffle up in Papa's room, then the shot came and she screamed in a way Mike would never forget.

"Papa—oh, Papa!" she screamed. And they heard a scrambling sound up on the porch roof over their heads, and from the sound of it the bigger man had survived the shot. Now Maltin was fully out of the window and making his getaway. Soon he'd drop to the ground and be gone.

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Within seconds, Mike had gone inside and was back with the revolver from the living-room desk clumsily in one hand. Maltin had landed on the ground and was getting to his feet.

"Drop your gun!" Mike shouted.

Maltin started to run and Mike fired. The man fell heavily to the ground.

Mike stood still in the darkness, staring at the silent body. There were no witnesses in the empty street, no lights flipped on in neighbors' windows. The revolver was cold in Mike's hand even though it had just been fired. He felt he was different now for having killed a man. He'd changed and it was going to mark him forever, though he didn't know yet whether it would be for the good or the bad.

"Come inside, Mike," Franny said quietly from the window upstairs. "We haven't got much time."

He followed her into the kitchen at the back of the house, where she set out Papa's strongbox. There were papers and folders and documents and such things inside.

"Papa's dead, Mike."

He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, honey."

"The two guns, the one you're holding and the one up in Papa's closet, they're not licensed, but that shouldn't matter since this is a case of self-defense and murder. You've got nothing to worry about since all you did was use a gun in defense of Papa's life." She pointed to the strongbox. "This is Papa's investment portfolio, all of it insurance policies, the business he threw to all those salesmen in return for tips on the big-ticket property. He's got whole life and a lot of term, and some of it's double indemnity but not all. I'm the sole beneficiary." Her eyes teared up. "It wasn't how it was supposed to end. But he knew he was dying and—well, anyway, Mike, I'm your well-to-do wife."

"But—"

"I'm going to call the police now, Mike. Nothing's going to happen to you, or to me. The worst would be the cops figuring Nicky and Papa were partners, which won't matter so much now. And the way Papa worked with the insurance companies, nobody's going to want to dig much into that." She picked up the telephone and dialed 911.

When she hung up, they walked back out through the house to the front porch and sat down close to each other again, watching for the police car. It seemed so strange that less than an hour before they had been watching for fireflies to wish on.

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a *NEW* short story by

SHIZUKO NATSUKI

Guests entered the lobby of the Castle Motel through an arched gate. On the right side of the lobby was the front desk, which was screened off by a dark amber-tinted glass so that guests at the desk were spared the embarrassment of facing the desk clerk, even though the clerk had a clear view of the guests from his side. On a large plate-glass on the opposite wall were displayed color photographs of each of the twenty-three rooms available in the motel. If the picture was lighted up, it meant that the room was available. The guests would indicate the room of their choice by pressing the button beside it and the desk clerk would hand them the key to that room . . .

THE LOVE MOTEL

by ***SHIZUKO NATSUKI***

The part of Shibuya which is Dogenzaka 2 Chome has been known as a shopping district. But if you go a short way farther along this shopping street, the area around the main branch of the Tokyu Department Store, you can turn off into a maze of narrow, winding alleys, many no more than three meters wide. Clustered on these narrow streets are the love hotels. Large and small, there are more than a hundred of them altogether—probably the largest congregation of love hotels in the city.

Since this is the very heart of Shibuya's busiest district, land prices are extremely high, and yet the buildings here are not particularly tall. Indeed, most of them are two- or three-story structures jammed tightly together. The reason they are no taller is that most of the buildings are flimsily constructed. On the other hand, by having all the hotels clustered together this way, they bring together throngs of customers, so that the vacancy rate in the hotels is quite low and most of them are busy and prosperous.

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Among these hotels is one three-story building built like a castle. The outer wall is faced with white tile and there are three round turrets with bronze-colored roofs. On the whole, it vaguely reproduces the effect of what may have been an Arabian castle presented in a rather traditional and symbolic manner. Because of the height of its turrets and the fact that it has some twenty-three guest rooms, it rather stands out compared to the other hotels.

At 7:15 on a Tuesday evening in April, the house phone rang at the front desk of the Castle Motel. The blinking red light indicated that the call came from Room 305 on the third floor. Since the people in that room had been there more than an hour, the desk clerk supposed they were ready to check out. Putting the phone to his ear, he was assaulted by a man's voice, shrill to the point of hysteria and abnormally high-pitched.

"Come quickly! Something terrible has happened—something really terrible!"

The desk clerk, a man in his thirties, dropped the phone and rushed from behind the counter. Since this sort of motel is mostly used by people who would not care to be recognized by colleagues, no one would call for help unless there was a serious problem. In the past there had been two occasions when elderly guests had died from their exertions. Another time a young hoodlum had been there with a bar hostess he had picked up. They had had a lovers' quarrel and it had ended with her stabbing him and an ambulance had to be called.

The clerk took the elevator to the third floor. Above the door to Room 305 glowed a small red light, indicating that the room was occupied. The clerk knocked on the door, but there was no immediate response. He continued to knock and rattle the doorknob until someone on the inside unfastened the lock and opened the door. The clerk pushed into the room past the man who had opened the door. A nearly nude woman was sprawled on the carpet where she had fallen. Her hair was fixed in a permanent and tinged a light brown. The profile of her face that was visible was white as parchment. She wore a bright-crimson brassiere and the lower part of her body was wrapped in a bath towel.

After his first shocked view of the woman, the clerk noticed a small pool of vomit by her mouth and near her outstretched hands was a bottle of orange juice which had spilled, leaving an orange stain on the carpet. The man, clad only in boxer shorts, cringed to one side, a stupefied look on his face. He had a thin, bony chest and

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his hair and thick moustache were nearly silver. His small, sunken eyes were wide with surprise. "Oh, this is terrible—just terrible," he said in a shaky voice.

"What happened?" the clerk asked him.

"Ru—I mean Sato—had just gotten out of the bath and got some juice from the refrigerator when she suddenly went into convulsions and collapsed."

"She got it from the refrigerator?"

The woman had collapsed in front of the refrigerator, which was stocked with an assortment of beer, juice, and isotonic drinks. The clerk suddenly realized that if that was true, it would make the situation very awkward for the hotel and he began to shake the woman roughly. "What's the matter with you?" he said to her. "Wake up." But the girl remained inert and unresponsive. She didn't appear to be breathing.

"I'd better call an ambulance," said the clerk, reaching for the house phone by the bed.

The ambulance arrived about five minutes later and the paramedics accompanying it immediately pronounced the girl dead. The emergency had also been called in to the Shibuya police and shortly a number of detectives and uniformed officers showed up, as well as a doctor dispatched from the emergency room of a nearby hospital.

After giving the girl a proper examination, the middle-aged doctor picked up the orange-juice bottle and sniffed it. "I would guess that the cause of death is poisoning, perhaps by some agricultural chemical," he said. "I can smell some sort of oil or tar in this."

"You mean poison was mixed in the orange juice," said Inspector Yazawa. He opened the refrigerator and examined its contents, then, slipping on a pair of gloves, took out two bottles of orange juice. These were the same brand the girl had been drinking. "It looks to me as though the cap has been removed and then replaced." The other detectives studied the bottle cap and expressed agreement with his observation.

"If it had been a carbonated beverage, it would have lost its fizz, but with orange juice you can't tell," said one.

The other bottle of juice appeared not to have been tampered with. Nor was there any evidence of tampering on any of the other beverages in the refrigerator. Inspector Yazawa spoke to the desk clerk and learned that as far as the beverages were concerned, the room-

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service maids replenished whatever had been consumed when they cleaned the rooms after a guest checked out.

"I'll find out when these were put here," the clerk told him.

At the moment, about sixty percent of the rooms—fourteen of the twenty-three—were occupied. Detectives were sent to every room to check the refrigerators while Inspector Yazawa listened to the desk clerk explain how the motel was run.

There was a garage that would accommodate no more than eight cars, but more than half of the guests came on foot. They entered the large, bronze-colored lobby through an arched gate. On the right side of the lobby was the front desk, which was screened off by a dark amber-tinted glass so that guests at the desk were spared the embarrassment of facing the desk clerk, even though the clerk had a clear view of the guests from his side. On a large plate-glass on the opposite wall were displayed color photographs of each of the twenty-three rooms available in the motel. If the picture was lighted up, it meant that that room was available. The guests would indicate the room of their choice by pressing the button beside it and the desk clerk would pass them the key to that room. Beside the desk was a sign indicating the room rates—6,800 yen to stay all night, 4,300 yen for those who chose to stay less than two hours.

Once the guests had received their key, they could take the elevator to the proper floor. The light over the door of the room would not be lit, but once the guests had entered the room and locked the door, the light would automatically go on to protect them from intrusion. There was an emergency exit at the end of the hall on each floor which was ordinarily kept latched on the inside. Inspector Yazawa checked to see that all the emergency exits were all still latched on the inside and then returned to Room 305.

There he found the man with silver hair sitting on the edge of the round bed that was hung with curtains made to resemble a Gobelin tapestry. The man was now dressed in a black suit. He still appeared stunned by what had happened. Yazawa took him into the next room, which happened to be vacant. The room didn't have a round bed, but one of a more complicated design which could be illuminated by bright-blue lights. The bathroom was set apart by a smoked-glass panel so that someone on the outside could get a view, but only a hazy one, of a person in the bath. There was a TV set with a video player for showing porno movies—in front of it several chairs. The

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man sat in one of these while Inspector Yazawa and a young assistant sat facing him.

"What's your name?" Yazawa asked.

"Ogura Masaaki," the man replied in a faint voice. As he said his name, he traced the Chinese character for it on the palm of his hand. It occurred to Yazawa that there was something almost majestic about the man's name which seemed to go well with his grave, refined features. The man had an unusually large head for his slender build. This dignified man with his fine name seemed out of place in a love hotel.

"Your age?"

"I'm fifty-three."

"I believe you also know the name of the dead woman."

"Yes. She was Sato Rumiko."

"What sort of work did she do?"

"She worked in a bar in Shinjuku."

"How old was she?"

"I believe she was twenty-three."

"Have you known her for long?"

"Not really. I suppose I've known her for a year and a half."

There seemed to be a note of regret in his faint, nasal voice. He nodded his head and took a deep breath.

Today Sato had agreed to meet him at six o'clock at a coffee shop on Dogenzaka and they had walked to the motel from there. It had been about 6:15 when they checked in. They had selected Room 305 and gone directly about the business they had come to the motel for. Afterward, Ogura had gone into the bath first, then when Sato had taken a bath he had relaxed on the bed.

After a long soak in the tub, she had come out wearing a bra, with a bath towel around her waist. She had complained that her throat felt dry and went to the refrigerator. "Ru worked in a bar, but she almost never drank alcohol," Ogura said. "She took out a bottle of orange juice and took a big drink—she swallowed maybe two-thirds of the bottle in one gulp. Then she moaned and clutched at her throat. It all happened so fast there wasn't time for me to administer first-aid or anything."

He had been shocked for a moment, but once he recovered himself, he had called the front desk.

"Had either of you opened the refrigerator before she got the orange juice?"

"No. Neither one of us touched it."

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"So you didn't drink anything yourself?"

"I took a drink of water while I was in the bathroom. That was all."

"Did anything seem odd or unusual when you first came into the room?"

"I didn't notice anything in particular."

"Had you come here before in the past?"

"No." Ogura shook his head. He was silent for a moment, then admitted, "Actually, we were here one other time—about six months ago—but we used a different room."

Yazawa began questioning the man about how often he used the hotel. Had he and Sato Rumiko met at love hotels once a month? Twice a month? Did they usually meet in this neighborhood? As the questioning went on, the man began to describe their relationship with a rather shameful expression on his face. Generally Ogura would meet Sato at Dogenzaka on his way home from work and they would spend an hour and a half or so at one of the love hotels before she hurried off to her job in Shinjuku.

"She was actually a very nice girl—not the sort you would expect to find among bar hostesses these days. She was a good girl. I always felt kind of sorry for her." Tears came to his eyes and he looked as though he were about to break down.

"You say it was customary to meet her on your way home from work. Where is it you work?"

"In Chiyoda Ward, near the Imperial Palace."

"Where exactly?"

A moment passed before the man could bring himself to answer. But then he straightened his shoulders and sat more erectly. His expression was complex, but it seemed to Yazawa it was composed of equal parts defiance and embarrassment. He raised his hooded, deep-set eyes and said gravely, "I work for the Imperial Household Agency."

After all the refrigerators had been checked, it turned out that none of the drinks in any of the other rooms had been tampered with—only those in Room 305. After consulting with the desk clerks and the cleaning staff, the police learned that the previous guest had checked out of Room 305 around 5:30. Those guests had informed the front desk in advance that they would be checking out. They had, in fact, called the desk around 5:20. At that time the desk clerk asked if they had used any of the drinks from the refrigerator and

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had been told that they had taken one soft drink and one bottle of juice. Since the guests at the hotel who arrived by car tended not to drink alcohol, the consumption of soft drinks was high.

At 5:30, when the earlier guests had come down to the front desk, their bill had already been prepared and they paid and returned their room key. There had been no discussion.

Between the time they had checked out and the new guests checked in, a woman from the cleaning staff had been in the room. The first thing she had done was check the contents of the refrigerator and informed the front desk of what had been consumed. The desk clerk had then checked to make sure this tallied with what the guests had reported.

After that the cleaning staff had cleaned the room. Making sure the furniture was in the proper place, they dusted, vacuumed, cleaned out the ashtrays, and remade the bed with fresh sheets before cleaning the bathroom. The thing that guests to hotels such as these found most distasteful was evidence that the room had been previously occupied by someone else. After scrubbing the bathtub thoroughly, the staff dried it with clean towels. The entire process took about thirty minutes and when it was completed, the picture in the lobby was lighted indicating the room was ready for the next customer.

The maid who had cleaned Room 305 spoke very frankly about the drinks consumed by the previous guests. "They had a soft drink and a bottle of juice. They left the two bottles and two glasses on the table. I checked the refrigerator and reported its contents to the front desk, then took the empty bottles to the kitchen and replaced them with fresh ones. The new ones had their lids sealed on properly—I don't know about the ones that were still in the refrigerator. After that, I washed the glasses and put them back on top of the refrigerator."

It appeared that the earlier guests had suffered no ill effects, and that therefore the juice they had consumed had been uncontaminated. And if the cleaning maid's testimony could be believed, the new juice she had put in the refrigerator was also uncontaminated. When Ogura and Sato had entered the room, the refrigerator contained its usual stock of three bottles of orange juice. Two of which contained poison. It was evident that Sato had drunk one of these and had died as a result.

What remained of the juice she had drunk as well as the other

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two bottles in the refrigerator were sent to the police lab for analysis. The results showed that the two bottles which had been tampered with contained quantities of the agricultural poison, Malthion—a powerful insecticide that could be purchased at any department-store garden shop, and strong enough so that, when mixed with juice, half a glass would be a fatal dose.

Sato's body was taken to the university hospital for an autopsy. There it was determined that she had indeed died of poisoning by Malthion. The estimated time of death was around seven in the evening. She appeared to have died immediately after ingesting the poisoned orange juice.

Who put the poison in the juice, and when?

There developed two theories regarding this case. One was that it was the work of a random killer. This view was that some person or persons entered Room 305 before Ogura and Sato arrived and poisoned the bottles of juice. Sato had simply been the unfortunate one to drink the poisoned beverage. As far as a motive was concerned, it could either be a truly random killer or someone who had a grudge against the Castle Motel and wanted revenge.

The Shibuya police began checking on all the motel's employees and managers to verify their personal relationships. But if this *was* the work of a random killer, the motel could have been chosen at random—which would make the investigation very tough indeed. Seven years earlier, there had been a case where poison had been put in a soft drink, and that case was still unsolved. More recently, there had been a threatening letter in the newspapers, saying that the packaged cookies marketed by a certain company had been impregnated with cyanide. There were other cases—unfortunately not that rare—where people had left poisoned meat on the street so that dogs and cats would eat it and die. Thus it was entirely possible that someone who felt that love hotels and the people who used them were objectionable had sought retribution in this manner.

The second theory, of course, was that the killer specifically wanted to harm or kill Sato Rumiko.

At the beginning of the investigation, the police gave equal weight to both theories, but as the investigation proceeded and they learned more about Sato Rumiko's character and life style, it began to seem more plausible that she herself was the target of the attack.

Sato had claimed to be twenty-three years old, but it turned out that she was actually twenty-six. She had been born into a farm family in northern Japan and had dropped out of high school in her

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freshman year and made her way to Tokyo. There she had worked in a succession of jobs in massage parlors and bars. Back in her hometown, her father, who was now an invalid, lived alone, but Sato, who had been away for more than ten years, had never once returned home during that time.

Up until about a year ago, she had worked in a massage parlor in Shinjuku, but had quit in a dispute over money with one of her customers. Since then, she had been working in a small bar in the entertainment district. She lived in a small studio apartment in Kita Shinjuku. Having lived on her own in Tokyo since the age of fifteen, she seemed to have had the philosophy that it was all right to do anything as long as she was paid for doing it. Indeed, it seemed that the older she got the more committed she became to making money. Being young and attractive, she used her body as a weapon and made money from men in any way she could. In a locked box in the closet of her apartment, the police found fixed-term deposit certificates and savings bonds amounting to nearly $100,000.

This being the case, it seemed likely that among the men whose money she had taken there were more than a few who had been left feeling bitter or resentful. This made it necessary for the detectives to check out the places she had worked to try to sort out the web of liaisons and relationships she'd been involved in. But despite all the legwork, they failed to turn up anyone who might have a sufficiently strong motive to have killed her.

Whenever she was propositioned by one of the patrons of a bar where she worked, they would go to a hotel. For some time her only steady, long-term patron had been Ogura Masaaki. So in the end all the police had as the prime suspect in the case was Ogura.

On the day of the murder and the next few days, Ogura was brought to the police station in Shibuya for protracted questioning. He reiterated that he had known Rumiko for about a year and a half. He had first met her while she was still working in the massage parlor and had been captivated instantly by her lovely, innocent face and amply endowed body. For a time he had gone frequently to the massage parlor, but since he worked at the Imperial Household Agency, he realized it would never do to be seen there, so he had arranged their rendezvous at love hotels, even after she left the massage parlor and began working at the bar. "As far as that goes," he said, "I would have been in trouble if I had been seen going into

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one of the hotels, but the streets there are so narrow and usually deserted that it seemed safer than meeting at a massage parlor."

"You told us you work in the library of the Imperial Household Agency. What exactly do you do there?"

"We mostly distribute publications, but for many years I have been involved with the repair and restoration of old books that have been damaged."

Although the police questioning went on for a long time, Ogura seemed to have gotten used to it. He was beginning to relax and talk more freely. He told them his father was a bureaucrat in the Tokyo municipal administration and he himself, after graduating from a local high school, had taken a mid-level civil-service exam and won a so-called non-career position in the Imperial Household Agency. The non-career bureaucrats could expect to receive some promotions, but they would only rise to a limited level. For that reason, although he was already fifty-three years old, he had only recently been promoted to the position of section chief. At home he had a wife and two sons, one attending college and one in high school.

The interrogating officer looked at the suspect with his carefully trimmed silver moustache and noted that although the man displayed a certain formality there was something timid about him. "It seems to me that people who work at the Imperial Household Agency are accorded more respect than ordinary people and are expected to behave with dignity. But you went and got involved with a massage-parlor girl young enough to be your daughter. I think you wanted to drop her, but she wouldn't let you go. Men like you can never get away from women like Rumiko. I'll bet she was really taking you for a bundle. I think you finally reached the point where you couldn't stand it any longer. You got some poison, invited her to the motel, and while she was in the bath you—"

"That's not true! Rumiko wasn't that sort of girl. When it came to asking for money—well, that doesn't matter now. What you're saying simply isn't true. She had a good heart, even if she was a bar hostess. She was a sweet girl."

"Come on. You were being swindled."

"No! That's absolutely not true! I am still saddened by what happened to her. She was just a poor young girl who never wronged anyone. For her to be living in that shabby place was a shame. She only wanted me to find something better for her."

With these words, it seemed as if his real regret was being ex-

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pressed for the first time. The police continued to try to get him to confess to the crime, but he refused.

"Look," he said, "there is one thing you're overlooking. It's clear that the poison must have been mixed with the juice before we went into the room. Even if you assume that I had some reason for wanting to kill Rumiko, why would I have chosen to do it at a motel like that? I've worked hard all my life to establish myself in the position I have achieved. Now that I have gotten involved in this affair, my career is ruined. After a lifetime of work and effort, my job and my prospects are gone. If I had actually done this, it would have made more sense for me to have run away rather than to have reported the matter. At a love hotel like that, they don't look at the guests' faces. I could have just walked away, but I did the right thing—I called the front desk and reported the death. What a naive fool I was."

Three days after the murder, Ogura continued to claim his innocence. It looked as though the investigation had come to a dead end. No other prime suspects emerged and this led some to revive the random-killer theory. A mood of frustration began to take hold of the homicide department.

But on the fourth day, on the Saturday, shortly before noon, a young man showed up at the Shibuya police station and said he wanted to talk to the officer in charge of the investigation. He appeared to be about thirty. He was of medium build and height, wore a blue suit, and in general gave the impression of being a serious sort of office employee.

Inspector Yazawa met with him in a small conference room.

"Forgive me for dropping in like this," said the man formally as he bowed. "Here is my card." According to the card, his name was Takei Makoto and his business address could only be termed a second-class location, but he did work for the trading department of a respectable securities-trading company. When asked his age, he said he was thirty.

"I really should have come to you sooner," he said, "but, well, the fact is that I am the guest who occupied Room 305 at the Castle Motel on Tuesday evening. I think I must have been there just before the girl died."

Inspector Yazawa stared at the young man in surprise. "If you were, you're the one who drank orange juice from the refrigerator and suffered no ill effects."

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"No, that's not really the case."

According to the way Takei told it, shortly after 4:00 P.M. on Tuesday afternoon he had returned to Tokyo after being away on a business trip. He stopped at Harajuku to pick up a snack-bar hostess he knew and they drove around for a while in his car. At around 4:20, they checked into the Castle and quite by chance selected Room 305.

After they had made love, they went to the refrigerator and got out a soft drink for the woman and a bottle of orange juice, which Takei had poured into a glass for himself.

"When I opened the bottle, I thought the lid was rather loose, but I didn't think anything about it until I took a drink of the juice. It had a strange, oily smell and it tasted bad. I kept most of what I had drunk in my mouth and went to the bathroom and spit it into the sink. I poured the rest of the juice into the glass and tried to identify the oily smell, but all I could tell was that there was definitely something wrong with it. I ended up pouring it all down the sink."

"You washed it all away?"

"Yes. At the time it didn't occur to me that someone might have tampered with it and put poison in it—I figured some earlier guest had opened it some time ago and put it back in the refrigerator. I just thought it had spoiled."

Yazawa waited.

"There seemed to be nothing wrong with the soft drink, so I had a glass of that and it seemed to clean my mouth out. After that, I smoked a cigarette and then called the front desk to tell them we were ready to check out."

"Did they ask you if you had had anything to drink?"

"Yes. I was about to protest paying for the orange juice, but just at that moment I suddenly changed my mind—"

It was at this point that the thought occurred to him that something might have been put into the drink. He decided that if he said anything about the juice tasting funny, the motel might call in the police. If that happened, it might come to light that he had picked up a snack-bar hostess and gone to a love hotel on company time. So in the end all he had told the front desk was that they had consumed a soft drink and a bottle of orange juice.

They had then gone down to the front desk, where he turned in their key and received an itemized bill.

"The next day when I read in the newspaper that a guest who had come to that room after me had drunk poisoned orange juice and

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died, I was, of course, flabbergasted. In fact, I could only think how close I might have come to dying myself."

After that, he had known he should come to the police with his story, but he was very busy at work on Wednesday and by evening he was exhausted, so he had put it off until the next day. On Thursday morning he wasn't feeling well, but still he planned to stop by the police station on his way home from work. By noon, though, he was feeling nauseated and weak, and his arms and legs were leaden. He had gone to a nearby hospital with his symptoms and was told he was experiencing a slight muscle paralysis.

"Thinking about what had happened, I decided to ask the doctor about it. I said that two days previously I had drunk a mouthful of bad-tasting orange juice and asked him if that could have some bearing on my symptoms. The doctor said it was possible that that was the problem. He said that, depending on the quantity consumed, a deadly poison can show up as muscle paralysis after two or three days."

That day and Friday Takei had stayed home from work, and now he was feeling recovered.

"I realize now," he said, "that if I had only raised the question of the orange juice when I checked out, the next guest may not have been sacrificed. A terrible crime has been committed and I'm here now to help see justice done if I can."

He concluded by saying in a low voice that he hoped he could keep his name from being mentioned publicly in the matter.

The snack-bar hostess who had accompanied Takei to the motel was brought in for questioning. She confirmed the details of his story—he had taken a drink of orange juice in his mouth, made a funny face, and gone to the bathroom, where he had spit it out. Both at the motel and later in the car, he had complained of something wrong with the orange juice, but he had asked her not to say anything about it because he didn't want any trouble from the police.

The desk clerk at the motel remembered Takei's face and that of the girl.

Homicide next checked all the empty juice bottles that could be found at the Castle Motel. The cleaning maids rounded up all the empties that had been gathered from the various rooms and packed them in a box. From among these, the police lab found one that contained minute traces of Malthion. Because the bottle had not yet been washed, traces of the poison remained. The police were able

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to lift fingerprints from the bottle and when these were compared to Takei's prints, two of them matched. In this fashion it was determined that the bottle had indeed come from Room 305.

At this point, the case took a new twist. Suspicion directed toward Ogura was suddenly greatly reduced. Takei had checked into the motel at about 4:20 and it now appeared that Malthion was already in all three bottles of juice in the refrigerator. Takei had drunk one, which was replaced by a fresh one brought in by the maid when she cleaned the room. Sato Rumiko had drunk the second bottle and had died. At that point there remained in the refrigerator two bottles of juice, one with poison in it and one without.

Suspicion that this was the work of a random killer began to rise once again. The most likely prospect was that whoever had been in Room 305 before Takei had supposed that a later guest would drink juice from the refrigerator and so had mixed it with poison. It was clear that it would be a very difficult business to specify who that person was.

The next thing Homicide did was to investigate any connection linking Takei Makoto and Ogura Masaaki, or between Takei and Sato Rumiko.

Originally, Takei had come from Yamagata City in the far north. After graduation from the local high school, he had entered a university in Tokyo. He had worked at part-time jobs to pay for his school expenses and after graduation had immediately gone to work for the securities company where he was now employed. He had a wife and two children, a boy and a girl. They lived in a public-housing apartment in Akabane. Both his parents still lived in Yamagata. His father had worked for a local company and was now retired and living on his pension. Takei's record of performance in his company was undistinguished, but he had created no problems and caused no controversy.

For ten days, the homicide detectives pursued a thorough investigation to uncover any sign of a connection between Takei and either Ogura or Rumiko, but in the end they were unable to come up with anything. They had to acknowledge that Takei's testimony was believable, and as a consequence of that had to conclude that Ogura, too, was innocent. When they told Ogura they were beginning to believe his claim of innocence, he seemed only somewhat relieved. His shoulders still sagged and it appeared he still felt some remorse about what had happened. "That's fine," he wailed. "But

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what's going to happen to me at work? I'll either be fired or turned out to pasture. No matter what happens, it won't be good. This is terrible."

Seven months later the Poisoned Juice affair was closed by Homicide as unsolved. No new clues had turned up and it was supposed that some previous occupant of the room was a random killer.

Then, one Saturday evening at the end of November, Inspector Yazawa happened to be in Shinjuku for a school-class reunion. Afterward, he had gone out with a couple of old friends, and as they were walking down a crowded street in Shinjuku's entertainment district, he suddenly saw a sign on a bar that caught his attention. It took a second or two before he realized why he recognized the sign: it was the bar where Sato Rumiko had been working at the time of her death. "Let's try this place and see how it is," he said to his two friends, who were happy to accompany him because sometimes he talked about cases under his investigation and they enjoyed hearing the inside story.

The mama-san who ran the bar was about Yazawa's age. Her eyes lit up with pleasure when he entered the tiny bar. She had a thin face and wore a brightly colored kimono. She seemed to remember right away who Yazawa was.

"Well, it's been a long time," he said with a smile, noticing the pensive expression on her face. "I'm not here on business tonight."

"You're always welcome here," she said.

Somehow the three managed to cram their way into the crowded bar and were given stools at the counter next to the front door. Customers were being served by the mama-san and by a hostess in her twenties, evidently the girl who had been hired to replace Rumiko.

By the time each of the three men had consumed a couple of glasses of whiskey and water, the conversation had drifted from police investigations to certain rumors surrounding a friend they had in common. At that point, Yazawa slipped off his stool and headed for the restroom. When he came out, the mama-san was waiting for him with a fresh, hot towel for his face and hands. The customers who had earlier jammed the back of the bar had left, so they were alone here.

"Whatever happened to your investigation about Rumiko's death?" asked the mama-san in a low voice.

"Well, I'm afraid it wasn't cleared up," he admitted. He went on

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to explain that after the autopsy had been performed on Rumiko's body, it was supposed to be turned over to relatives, but because her father was bedridden her maternal aunt came to Tokyo from her hometown of Hakuseki in northern Japan to take care of the cremation and take the ashes home to Hakuseki.

Yes, the mama-san said, she herself had been particularly helpful to the aunt during that time: "The fact is, at the first of this month I was in Sendai on business, and afterward I went on to Hakuseki to pay my respects at Rumiko's grave. Traveling in that area is very convenient now that they've opened bullet-train lines in the northeast. It only takes about two hours to get to Sendai from Tokyo."

Yazawa nodded. "And a place like Hakuseki is really something. The station there looks like something that just sprang up from the rice fields. But a few shops and houses have begun to appear around the station and there is even a small apartment complex nearby. If Rumi had been born a little later, she might have found it worth staying."

"Yes," Mama-san said, "I don't think she realized what it is like there now. Land prices there have skyrocketed."

"Land prices? What are you talking about?"

"Well, I'd never been there before, so the first thing I did was go to her aunt's house—she'd told me to be sure to drop in and see her if I was ever in that area. So I did, and that was when I learned that Rumi's father had passed away in September."

Inspector Yazawa didn't interrupt this sudden revelation, so the woman continued. "He had had surgery in June of last year and they found that he had cancer. They didn't make any secret of it, but the old man hated being in the hospital, and since they couldn't treat the cancer anyway, they let him do as he liked and sent him home. During the summer he was in decent condition and living by himself. But once the weather turned, he took a turn for the worse."

"But what has that to do with skyrocketing land prices?"

"When he died, Inspector, he left several acres of land next to the new train station, and with land prices what they are today that parcel is worth something over a billion yen. All that would have gone to Rumi if she'd lived."

Yazawa remembered the facts about the victim. Rumiko was an only child. She had been born when her father was in his forties and her mother had died while Rumiko was in middle school. Her father had quickly found a second wife, but Rumiko had never gotten along with her stepmother and had gone off to Tokyo when she was in

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high school. Two years ago, the second wife had died and from that time on the old man had lived alone.

"In other words, you're telling me that Rumiko would have inherited all that land herself?"

"Yes. *If* she had lived. Rumiko was a hard worker and she saved her money, but she might as well not have bothered. Anyone could have seen that her father would die soon. But back when she left home, they hadn't even started building the bullet train. Back then it was just farmland, and that's why she never wanted to return home. I don't think the thought of owning that land ever occurred to her."

"I see. But in that case, does it mean there's no one else left to inherit the land?"

"No. There's one nephew. Her father's sister had gone off to Yamagata to be married and I heard that she had a son. He would be Rumi's cousin. If Rumi had lived, she would have inherited all the land. But with her dead, the whole estate went to the nephew instead."

"You mean he suddenly inherited a fortune he probably never even knew existed?" Even as he said it, Yazawa could feel his heart beginning to thunder in his chest.

"That's right," nodded the mama-san. "The cousin is about thirty years old and runs a coffee shop in Yamagata City, but even after Rumi's father fell ill he didn't bother to come visit the old man. Even his mother felt his behavior was disgraceful and was embarrassed to have him inherit the estate, but the law is the law and if it says he's entitled to the land he gets it."

"You say he's about thirty and lives in Yamagata," muttered Yazawa, calling to mind the features of Takei Makoto, who was thirty years old and from Yamagata.

Rumiko's cousin who had inherited her father's entire estate was named Sato Yoshio and he was just thirty years old. It was pure chance that he had the same surname as Rumiko. Sato is a common name in that part of Japan. His parents had been farmers on the outskirts of Yamagata City, but both of them had already passed away.

After graduating from high school, Yoshio had gone to work for a small company in the city because he hated farming. Three years ago, he was dismissed by the company and at the same time he sold a small piece of land he had inherited from his parents. With the

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money from that and some other money he was able to borrow, he opened a coffee shop in Yamagata City. He wasn't a very good manager, however, and apparently he decided that the only thing to do was get hold of his uncle's property any way he could.

In the end, he inherited his uncle's land, had the deeds transferred to his own name, and had already sold part of the land for about five hundred million yen.

Then it came to light that Sato Yoshio and Takei Makoto had been classmates at Yamagata High School. They, along with Ogura Masaaki, were brought in by the police and questioned separately.

The first to crack was Takei.

"The summer before last, I returned to Yamagata for a visit and went to Sato's coffee shop to see him. That night the two of us went drinking together and Sato told me that just a month earlier his uncle had undergone surgery for a stomach ulcer—or rather they had told his uncle it was an ulcer, but in fact it was cancer. He was old, but they thought it might not spread too fast. Sato told me the doctors said the old man had about a year to live."

His uncle had a single daughter named Rumiko who had left home and drifted with the wind. She was said to be working in the entertainment business in Shinjuku. She hadn't been home to see her father in more than ten years, but she would still inherit all the property once the old man finally died. But if Rumiko happened to die first, then everything would be inherited by Sato Yoshio, the old man's nephew.

"There were several acres of land which Sato estimated to be worth over a billion yen. He figured that after he paid off the inheritance taxes and all expenses, he would stand to gain something like 400 million yen. He pointed out that all that money was there, and it could all be his, but he wouldn't get to touch a single yen of it as long as Rumiko was alive."

After returning to Tokyo, Takei went to a detective agency to see if they could turn up anything of Rumiko's whereabouts. It wasn't difficult for them to trace her to the entertainment world of Shinjuku. After that, it took very little more investigation to turn up the fact that once or twice a month Rumiko went to a love hotel in Shibuya with a man named Ogura Masaaki who was employed by the Imperial Household Agency.

"I'm the one who recruited Ogura," Tokei told Yazawa. "The method of carrying out the crime was also mine. I had never met Ogura and had no connection with him, so when I reported back to

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Sato I recommended him as a suitable third party for the plan. We figured that as an employee of the Imperial Household Agency, he would probably be above suspicion. Besides, I thought, even if the police looked for some connection between Rumiko and me they would find nothing. After all, she came from a completely different place than I do.

"Anyway, I proposed to Ogura that if he would poison Rumiko for me, I would give him half the two hundred million yen Sato would pay me.

"I was shocked at how readily he jumped at the offer. But I suppose, being on the non-career track, he could see what the future held for him. After six or seven more years of mending old books every day, he would reach the mandatory retirement age and receive his small retirement pension, which would amount to maybe two or three million yen—while what I proposed would bring him an easy hundred million yen. And while if it became known that Ogura had taken a bar hostess to a love hotel and thereby offended the dignity of the Imperial Household Agency, as a person on the non-career track, he would merely be reassigned to some regional office. So he agreed to it."

Once Takei had confessed, neither Sato nor Ogura had a leg to stand on. As expected, Ogura had lost his position as section chief and been transferred to a regional office.

"I really got burned for fooling around with Rumiko." Ogura's deep-set eyes glittered under his drawn eyebrows. "She appeared so sweet and naive at first, but after that she stuck me for as much money as she could. Every time I tried to leave her, she came up with something to prevent me—threatening to tell my boss and things like that. It was at that point that Takei contacted me. It was his idea to use an agricultural chemical.

"On the day of the murder, he went to the Castle Motel with a girl who knew nothing of what was going on and used Room 305. He put some of the poison in a bottle of juice and left the empty bottle there when he checked out. I calculated about how long it would take them to clean the room after he checked out and then showed up there with Rumiko.

"It was Rumiko's habit every time we had sex to have a long bath afterward and then drink some orange juice. While she was in the bath, I took the poison Takei had given me and put it into two bottles of juice. I believed that even if I were suspected of wanting to kill

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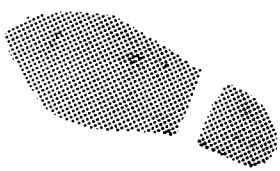
Rumiko, it was certain that a man in my position would never attempt such a thing in a love hotel. I thought it would be assumed that because of my position in the Agency, I would never do anything as cheap as this.

"Besides—" Ogura Masaaki smoothed his silver moustache, "—I was sick and tired of hearing all the time about how important the dignity of the Imperial Household Agency is."

—translated by Robert B. Rohmer



DETECTIVERSE

SHOPDROPPER

by GENE KEWAN

Entering a chic store in Bel Air,
The crook tried to act debonair.
He swiped a gold locket,
But it slipped from his pocket
And he was collared by Mr. Pierre.

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"You aren't Stewart," Ethel informed him.

"No lie?" he sneered. "You going to sit down or do I get to knock you down . . . ?"

A BUMP IN THE NIGHT

by CAROL CAIL

"Bump," went something in the night, and Ethel's brain roused her heart. In spite of it being over two years, her hand reached to pat the cold, dry sheets beside her.

More annoyed than scared now that she was awake, she carefully pried herself out of bed, one rusty limb at a time, shoveled her toes into derelict slippers, and wrestled with the recalcitrant robe so long she almost forgot why she was up. Steadying herself with trailing fingertips the length of the bed, she unhooked her cane from the footrail and stabbed it into the balding carpet the four times it took to reach the gaping hall door.

She navigated the dark hall with the set expression of a bicyclist determined to top a hill without stopping. The cane made muffled swallowing sounds into the floor. Where the passage widened into the cave of living room, she jabbed an unerring finger on the light switch.

Stewart was standing at the basement door thirty feet away, his hand on the knob; she couldn't tell whether he'd just closed it or was about to open it. His yellowing white hair needed a comb. His black trousers needed a wash. She'd never seen him wear sneakers before. Maybe once—the last time.

"Uh-oh," he said.

He turned fully around and, seeing it was her, grinned. "Hello, granny. Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep."

He let go the door and fished inside his windbreaker like he hadn't given up cigarettes. His hand emerged with the knife he used to whittle apples into bites as he sat in front of the TV.

"You're going to cooperate, right?" He gestured with the glowing blade. "Have a seat. And don't try anything cute."

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She thump-swished across the room and took a stance a yard from him, jutting her jaw as she studied his face. It must have been a trick of light that had made his hair white. Now any fool could see it was almost black, and so were the guilt-jumpy eyes.

"You aren't Stewart," she informed him.

"No lie?" he sneered. "You going to sit down or do I get to knock you down?"

She fumbled a tissue out of her robe pocket and swiped it leisurely at her nose. Soles rooted a foot apart, she hung the cane on her forearm and lowered herself into the hardwood chair beside the door he seemed to guard.

"Long as you're here," he said, shrugging his shoulders into a more relaxed pose, "where's your cash?"

"You don't look like Stewart, but yet there's a family resemblance. You aren't his sister Rita's boy?"

Rocking with rude disbelief, he stowed the knife in his clothes again. "Right. When the cops ask you, tell them it was Rita's boy."

He swung wide the basement door. The black hole exhaled mustiness. He tried other doors and drawers, bobbing and weaving around the furniture-stuffed space, leaving everything open, undone, untidy, exposed.

Ethel held her tongue as long as she could. "You were here a month or two ago. Selling magazines."

He snorted before upending her sewing basket. One spool of red thread rolled the width of the room, bleeding a thin straight line.

"I thought you were Stewart at first then, too. But he would never have sold magazines door to door."

"Neither would I, dearie, neither would I." His laugh sounded like a habit.

Her black handbag was tucked between the sofa and the gateleg table. Whirling around to sit on the former, he clamped the bag between his thighs and sorted through it.

"What was your name?" she asked apologetically, embarrassed to have forgotten it. Not noticing he didn't answer, she said, "Did you ever see *Arsenic and Old Lace?*"

After a moment of silence, during which he palmed the coins from a cloth change purse before pitching it over his shoulder, she continued, "I could never understand why Teddy went to the trouble of burying the bodies in the basement when he could have used the furnace. At that time, everyone burned coal."

He dragged the lining through the mouth of the bag, being sure

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he hadn't missed any valuable entrails. Her rejected belongings littered the sofa and floor—plastic comb, wadded handkerchief, one key tied to a rag, a grocery list with three items on it. He was methodically transferring the contents of her swollen black wallet into his skinned-up brown one.

"Thank you kindly, granny." He stood to replace his wallet in a hip pocket, giving himself a pleased slap.

"I'm not your or anyone else's granny," she lectured. "Stewart didn't care much for children. Or for the method of acquiring them," she dared to add.

He didn't hear her. Circling the room again, he was trawling for whatever might have been missed.

"So what magazines did you buy?" he said, picking at a back tooth with his pinkie nail.

"I didn't buy anything." She frowned at the wedding ring trapped on her bony finger by an arthritic knuckle. "I think."

He swaggered up beside her, snapping his fingers to music she couldn't hear. "What's in the cellar?"

"Preserves. Window screens. Stewart's workshop."

"Tools? Where's the light?"

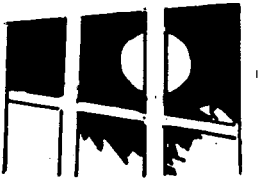
She struggled up and shuffled past him to tremble over the brink. "Here." She smacked the stair wall with the flat of her stick. "I have trouble reaching it."

He hauled her out of the way, a mover rearranging cheap furniture. She reverberated where he set her, seeing him stretch into the stairwell, his lean muscles aging into string, his look of anticipation beginning to crumble into irritation.

She put the tip of the cane into the small of his back and lunged it like Stewart sending the last ball into the corner pocket.

The sound he made falling was coal in the chute. There was even that one last little rattle before the house hushed.

Her Christian upbringing made Ethel hope to God this was the end of it. Superstition reassured her that third time is charm.



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a *NEW* Inspector Ghote story

by H. R. F. KEATING

"Shabash, Sergeant, shabash," Ghote would dutifully offer congratulation when Moos spoke of his unerring memory for fingerprints.

But congratulations never brought to a halt the steady dribble of fingerprint fact and fingerprint theory, the be-all and end-all of Sergeant Moos's existence. He had no other interests. He was not married, and all he did when at last he left his cabin at the Bombay Crime Branch after a day's work was get something to eat and then return to his quarters, where—Ghote had heard this at least a hundred times—he was collecting information to write the really definitive Indian book on—well, fingerprints.

A critical and poignant case of what-if for you and for H. R. F. Keating's intensely human Inspector Ghote . . .

THE EVIDENCE I SHALL GIVE

by H. R. F. KEATING

Sergeant Moos was a dashed bore. Inspector Ghote thought he was actually the most boring person he had ever known, a one-hundred-and-one-percent burden and bugbear. The trouble was the man could talk about just only one thing. His job, his kaam. Fingerprints.

Certainly there was no one to touch him in entire Bombay Crime Branch as an expert. For that reason, though he was past the statutory age of retirement, he had somehow stayed on in his little cabin, its filing cabinets crammed with the prints of every miscreant who had ever come to police notice. He was, in fact, one famous fellow. It should have been a great honor even to know him. Except

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he was altogether unable to speak of anything else than his whorls, his loops, and his arches.

So although from time to time Ghote felt obliged to allow himself to be caught by Moos, who seemed to know by some sort of telepathy if he had gone across for something to eat or was on the point of leaving for home, mostly he went to a good deal of trouble to keep out of his way. He had heard Moos's stories and accounts too often, each and every one of them.

"Ghote bhai, was I ever telling you one trick your clever badmash is sometimes trying? You know what it is such a fellow is attempting? He is presenting his fingers to be printed in wrong order only. Yes, yes, one devilish cunning move. He is thinking that when the said card is coming before me and I am seeing twinned loops and tented arches on third finger of right hand when on my records I have such on fourth finger, I would be altogether deceived."

At that point in this story—each time it was told—a glow of simple pleasure would come into the big soft brown eyes in Moos's moonlike face and the cigarette that seemed to dangle permanently from his loose lips would for a moment burn with a brighter light.

"But what a badmash like that is not at all counting on," he would continue, filling in every possible corner of the picture, "is that I am having a tiptop memory for any shape or form of fingerprint. Yes, tiptop though I am saying it. So every time I am catching out such fellows. Never once failing."

"Shabash, Sergeant, shabash," Ghote would dutifully offer congratulation.

But congratulations never brought to a halt the steady dribble of fingerprint fact and fingerprint theory, the be-all and end-all of Sergeant Moos's existence. He had no other interests. He was not married, and all he did when at last he left his cabin after a day's work was get something to eat and then retire to his quarters, where—Ghote had heard this at least a hundred times—he was collecting information to write the really definitive Indian book on—well, fingerprints.

So when at the end of his own long day Ghote might be heading for home, thinking only of his Protima with his food waiting—or ready, if he was particularly tired, to press his feet—and Moos would appear suddenly at his elbow with "Inspector, what luck I am spotting you," his first reaction would be to put up some excuse. Any excuse.

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"Oh, hello, Moos bhai. I am just off to—well, I am in one devil of a hurry."

But then, more often than he could have wished, that excuse would fall away into nothingness. The look of pleading in Moos's big brown eyes would be too sad to ignore.

"But perhaps I can spare some minutes only."

Then, over a cold drink at Moos's expense—he was punctilious about paying for his pleasure—there would come once again the story about how such-and-such a history-sheeter had failed to beat Moos's fabulous memory by presenting his fingers to an inexperienced print taker in the wrong order. Or perhaps it would be some other piece of oft-repeated information.

"Did I ever tell, Inspector—not many people are knowing this—it is between the third and fourth what they are calling foetal month that the fingerprints are formed on the unborn child. And those prints thereafter are remaining for the whole of the said person's life unchanged? Those unique prints. Did you know that?"

And Moos would lean back from the little round table with the two fizzing glasses of Thums Up or Limca on it and a look of sun-effulgent pleasure at the beauty of that fact would spread all over his round face. The wet-tipped cigarette between his lips would perk up till it was pointing straight out in front of him, jauntily.

How then could Ghote say, "Yes, Sergeant, you have told me this already?" But after each such session he would say to himself that he was now entitled to adopt any evasive tactics that came to hand to prevent himself being caught again. For at least two weeks.

So it was with a feeling of entirely justified fury that late one afternoon he looked up from his desk to see Moos come bursting in. Only two days before had he not listened patiently for nearly three-quarters of an hour while he had been told—as if it wasn't something he had known since he had been a probationary sub-inspector at Nasik Police Training School—that a workable method of classifying fingerprints had first been developed in India in 1897 by Mr. Edward Henry, later Sir Edward, Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard, and that his trusted assistant, Sub-Inspector Azizul Haque, had earned the title Rai Bahadur and an award of rupees 5,000?

"Oh, Ghote, you are here?"

"Yes. Why would I not be in my seat? Unless I was out on a case. As I have been till one hour past, and my report not yet finished."

But the pointed remark went for nothing. Moos simply slouched

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forward, pulled away one of the chairs in front of the desk, and slumped down onto it.

On his innocent typewriter Ghote took out the rage he felt at this blatant disregard of the unacknowledged agreement that he should be badgered by Moos only when he was not actually at work. He seized the wretched machine and dumped it on the floor beside his narrow desk with a crash that risked yet another key becoming appallingly stuck.

But then, as he looked across at Moos, something in the fellow's wide round face drained all his anger away. He did not look at all well. He looked, in fact, grey with illness, or with perhaps the effect of some catastrophic news. And, for surely the first time ever in Ghote's recollection of him, he was not mangling a cigarette between his lips.

"What is it you are wanting, bhai?" he asked then, fearing what he might hear in reply.

But to his surprise Moos answered with his usual request.

"I was wondering— If—if you have some minutes only to spare, Inspector, can we go for a cold drink?"

For a moment Ghote contemplated saying straight out that they did have an arrangement, however much it had never been spoken of, that Moos would not get more than one chat per fortnight. But the grey look on the fellow's face was still there, undiminished. So, although this happened to be the first evening for a week that Ghote was going to be able to get home at a decent hour, he yielded.

He received another surprise then. Moos, although scrupulous about standing treat, invariably took him to an Irani restaurant some way from Headquarters where the prices were moderate. Now, unexpectedly, he proposed a complete break with tradition.

"It is good of you to find some time, Inspector," he said. "I am well knowing you must be wanting to get back to your wife and child. But— But— Well, shall we go to Badshah Juice Bar? You were once stating you were very much enjoying their Ganga Jamuna."

It was true that the mixture of fresh lemon and orange juice, called in comparison with the confluence of the two holiest of India's rivers a Ganga Jamuna, was something—served deliciously chilled—that Ghote particularly delighted in on the rare occasions he felt he could allow himself to sample the air-conditioned luxury of the Badshah, just over the way from Headquarters. But it was extraordinary that, since there could be no fingerprint link to that indulgence of his, Moos should ever have remembered it.

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And why was Moos offering to take him to such a posh place at all?

Evidently he was not going to find the answer in a hurry. Once having secured himself the promise of an audience, Moos lapsed into heavy silence. Ghote rapidly cleared the papers from his desk—acknowledging to himself that he had had little intention of finishing his report that day—called to the office peon that he was leaving, and made his way, with Moos a looming, stonelike presence at his side, out and across the jostling, horn-hooting streams of traffic to the Badshah Juice Bar.

When at last he was seated in front of a tall condensation-pearled glass of Ganga Jamuna, and Moos, opposite, had a simple mosambi juice—which despite the fact that he was still not smoking it looked as if he had little intention of touching—Ghote ventured to put a question.

"Well, Sergeant, what is it you are wanting to chat?"

But Moos did not answer.

Ghote shot him a glance in the cool dimness of the bar's upstairs room. Certainly, he did not look at all well.

"Bhai, are you ill itself? Is it serious?"

Thoughts of cancer—all those cigarettes—of leprosy, even, flashed into Ghote's mind.

"No, no," Moos replied, however, "I am hundred percent fit, Inspector. You are knowing I have never had one day of sick-leave in all my years of service?"

"Yes, yes—I remember you saying it. But, all the same, you look as if you are not keeping well, bhai."

"Well?"

Moos sounded as if this was the first he had ever heard of any suggestion that he might be ill. But, if he was not so, what could be wrong with him? And this silence! He was hardly reluctant normally to talk, to talk and to talk, whenever he had secured a captive audience. So why was he saying nothing now?

Ghote took a sip of his Ganga Jamuna. It was, as ever, delicious. But somehow he could not quite savor it to the full. He looked across at Moos.

"Inspector," the old fellow said at last, seeming to drag the word syllable by syllable, letter almost by letter, from deep inside himself. "Inspector, there is something I have to tell."

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"Yes? But that is what we have come here for, isn't it? For you to chat?"

Moos picked up his glass of mosambi juice, looked at it, and put it down again. "Inspector," he asked, lowering his voice almost to a murmur, "Inspector, you are knowing the Phalnikar case?"

"But, yes, Sergeant, of course. Up in court tomorrow, no? Plenty of kudos for Crime Branch there. Who would ever have thought we would be able to lay hands on the culprit when they were first finding his Honor's body in that flat that day? And your evidence will be the clincher, bhai. No getting past fingerprints."

Sergeant Moos was famous, too, for his demeanor in the witness box. No defense pleader, however wily his tactics, however hectoring, had ever been known to shake Moos's simple certainties.

But instead of the slow smile of satisfaction Ghote had hoped to call up on Moos's face by that tribute to the part he would play next day in bringing a murderer to justice, he replied only with a heaving groan.

"Moos? Moos, bhai, what is it? What has happened?"

"It— It—is this."

But there followed only another groan. From the depths.

"Yes, bhai? What it is?"

"Inspector, I have found—I have found something."

"Found something? What? Surely not that you have misidentified that print from the Phalnikar flat? You were telling a fortnight ago how good it was."

"No, no. It is not that."

"But then what is it, bhai? It is to do with the Phalnikar case? It cannot be anything too bad if it does not affect the evidence you would be giving."

"Inspector, it is worse. Worse. Altogether worse."

"No! What? Tell me, bhai. Tell me."

"Inspector—" Moos's voice had sunk yet lower. A mere sloshy whisper. "Inspector, it is this. I have found—I have found one print that is altogether identical with the one belonging to the culprit in the Phalnikar case."

"Identical?" Ghote repeated, struggling with bafflement. "But—but that cannot be, bhai. So often you are telling, I was learning it at P.T.S. even, no fingerprints are identical."

Wearily, with bowed-under weariness, Moos wagged his head in negative.

"No, Ghote, that is not what I have ever said. It is not what you

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were truly taught at training school, either. What I have always stated is that chances of two prints being one and the same have been calculated from the number of variable factors to be found on each finger—ridge endings, islands, lakes, spurs, crossovers, and bifurcations—as coming out at one in one hundred thousand crores. It is because of this that it is always accepted that prints constitute infallible evidence."

Figures slowly surfaced in Ghote's mind. 1:1,000,000,000,000. It was an incredibly small chance.

He looked at Moos across the narrow marble table. "And you are telling that this fantastic chance has actually happened? That you have seen a print that is cent per cent the same as the Phalnikar murderer's?"

"Yes."

It was a whisper of a whisper.

"You are sure?"

The question was ridiculous, he knew. Moos, when it was anything at all to do with fingerprints, was always doubly, trebly cast-iron sure.

"Yes, bhai. I am sure." The voice came as a series of small, dull hammer-strokes.

After a moment, Moos gave another of his beaten and battered groans. "You are knowing, Inspector," he went on ploddingly after a moment, "that in different countries they have different standards of comparison for prints. It is something I must have told one lakh times. We are having different standards in the different states of India even. In Karnataka it is twelve points that must agree before identity is accepted. In the U.P. it is six only. While in France it is as many as seventeen. And in the U.K. it is sixteen."

"Yes, yes."

It was true, as Moos had said, that he had produced these figures and others like them time and again in their chats. But never till now had he admitted by so much as a hint that the substance of their conversations had often been repeated and repeated.

"Well, Inspector, in these two prints I am telling you about I have checked, point for point, more than twenty-five agreeing. It was just only this morning that I was going over my evidence for court tomorrow—I am liking to have everything clear in my head, you know—and, suddenly, looking at the Phalnikar culprit's print, something became triggered off in my mind. A similarity, a most close similarity. I thought for a few moments only, and then I was able

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to go straight to the file in question. It was that of one Ram Prasad, just only one conviction for H.B."

"One housebreaking conviction only, and you were remembering that print? Moos bhai, you are altogether a wonder."

But the flattery did nothing for old Moos. He sat, his face still as grey as if he was working up to a dose of high fever, his expression that of a man who has just learned he is going to be hanged or shot.

"But," Ghote said eventually, "this is going to cast doubt upon all fingerprint evidences in each and every court, no? I mean, I can hear defense pleaders one and all referring to this discovery which you are making and stating that someone other than the accused must have committed the crime."

"Yes, yes. But it is worse, much worse. I have been sitting all day since I was checking and double-checking what I had found, and I have been thinking—it is not just only our cases, Inspector. It is worldwide also."

"Worldwide?" Ghote thought. "Yes. Yes, you are right. It would be worldwide. As soon as the news is getting out, everywhere in the world where a case is depending on fingerprint evidence your discovery will be brought in. You will be more famous, Moos bhai, than Rajiv Gandhi himself."

But Moos was as stolidly unimpressed by this as ever he was in the witness box by the bullying tactics of a defense pleader. "Soon there will be no more cases depending on fingerprint evidence," he said. "Before one year is out, the fingerprint departments of every police force in the world will be closed down. All the science that has been accumulated since year 1897 is destined to be doomed. All the energies and efforts of nearly one hundred years will be like dew on the grass before the scorch of the sun itself."

Now it was Ghote's turn to sit in silence. Moos, too, his terrible secret told, was again deprived of speech. His glass of mosambi juice remained untouched in front of him. Ghote's Ganga Jamuna seemed equally to be a mere token allowing him to sit in the dark cool privacy of the almost empty upstairs room of the Badshah Bar. To sit and think.

Everything Moos had said was true. That single discovery of his, made thanks to his phenomenal memory for every detail of his day-in, day-out study, was going to put paid forever to a whole highly important branch of the science of criminal identification. Yes, the name of Moos would be heard on the lips of lawyers from the furthermost west of America to the easternmost parts of Japan. Of

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Moos, destroyer of Sir Edward Henry, of Sub-Inspector Azizul Haque, of all the scientists and police technicians who had ever worked to create the vast system of fingerprinting.

And then his slow-circling thoughts arrived at a conclusion. He looked up.

"Moos bhai," he said. "There is one thing only for you to do. You must forget what you have seen. You must put back into the files that fingerprint of Ram Prasad and forget that you were ever even suspecting that it was identically the same as that one of the Phalnikar culprit's."

"No, Ghote bhai. Do not think I have not asked myself one lakh times if I should do that—if it was not my bounden duty even. But do it I cannot. It is there. I have seen it. I cannot persuade myself that I have not."

"But, bhai, you must. You must. You know what would be the terrible consequences if you do not. You have yourself said it. Criminals by the thousand, by the lakh, by the crore, will escape justice if what you have found ever becomes—"

An appalling thought flashed into his mind.

"Moos bhai," he said with frenzied intentness, "have you already told any other person except myself?"

"No, no, Ghote bhai. You know you are the only man in entire Crime Branch who will ever listen to me."

Ghote registered that, for the second time, Moos had admitted the inadmissible. So it was certain that only the two of them, Moos and himself, knew what had been discovered. Himself. He, too, now knew the world-shattering secret.

He sat in silence again, examining his conscience. What did he feel was his course in answer to the dilemma that now faced him and Moos equally?

Before long he found that his mind was made up. There must be some occasions in life when to lie, or at least to blot out the truth, was the one and only right thing to do. And this, beyond doubt, was one such occasion.

"Moos bhai," he said with renewed earnestness, "what you have found out must go no further. Not one inch. Ever."

"But, Ghote, have you thought? I have been thinking and thinking all day, remember. It is not all so simple. I cannot, I cannot, forget what I have seen with my own two eyes. I have seen it. And you, you will not be able to forget, either. Because I will show you the

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evidence. I must. That much I am owing you. And, once you have seen, you will have always before you the temptation to speak."

"No," Ghote jerked out in absolute denial. "No, no, no."

"Yes, my friend, you will. I have thought whether I would have this temptation, and I know that it would come to me. Perhaps on my deathbed only I will suddenly crave for that worldwide fame you have spoken of. Or when I am giving my biannual lecture at Nasik P.T.S., that lecture which Commissioner sahib himself was insisting I must give, perhaps then, even as I am explaining about odds of one hundred thousand crores to one, I would suddenly succumb to this temptation. Or what if I am one day getting drunk?"

"But, Moos bhai, you are never getting drunk."

"Yes, yes, it is true I have never touched any kinds of wines—I have not dared. But in my remaining life who can say that I will not? And then—"

"But, no, that will not happen. It must not. It will not for me, I am promising. I will never fall to the temptation to speak of this. Never. I have decided. Already my mind is made up. Moos, old friend, I am going to forget we have ever met today."

"Ghote bhai, you would not be able."

"Yes. Yes, I would. It is possible to forget as well as to remember. By one effort of will. From this moment on, I am putting out of my mind each and every word that you have said. And I am telling you to do the same. Forget. Forget. Make yourself to forget."

"No."

"Yes. It can be done. It can. If you are willing. Go back to your cabin now. Take that card with the prints of Ram Prasad on it and burn the same. Take out your lighter or your matchbox and then, better than putting the record of a two-per-paisa criminal back into the files, burn it. Just only burn it."

"But, Ghote, tomorrow itself I am to give evidence. In the High Court. And when I am asked by the State pleader, as they are always asking as a matter of routine only, whether the fingerprint put in as evidence is that of the accused and the accused only, what am I to say?"

Ghote braced himself. "You are going to say," he ordered Moos with all the authority he could bring to bear, "that the print put in as evidence is that of the accused. You know that this is so. Say it."

"But the Phalnikar culprit committed his atrocity in the course of housebreaking, you remember that. And Ram Prasad, whose fin-

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gerprint is utterly the same as the one I myself was finding at the scene of the crime, has one conviction for H.B. itself."

"Nevertheless," Ghote answered, leaning forward and directing his full gaze into Moos's face, "you are not going to remember that chance discovery you were making when tomorrow you are in the witness box. You are not."

"Ghote, I am. I will. I cannot help myself. Ghote bhai, fingerprints have been my whole life. Without my belief in the truth of them, where would I be? Ghote, on the matter of fingerprints I cannot lie."

"But, Moos bhai, think. If tomorrow in court you come out with this, then from that moment on the whole of your beloved science of fingerprinting will begin to crumble into dust. Into dust of dust."

"I know, Ghote, old friend, I know. But what to do? What to do?"

"Forget, bhai. I have said. Forget, forget, forget. Tell yourself that you have dreamt the whole thing. Tell yourself you were for two–three moments mad. One way or another, forget."

"Well, I have wondered that: whether I had gone mad. But that record card, that fingerprint, it is there, Ghote. It is there." Moos picked up the untouched glass of mosambi juice and banged it so emphatically on the surface of the table that a dollop of the pale lime slopped out over his hand. He failed to notice it. "Listen," he said, "you must see that card also. Come now—come and see with your own eyes."

Ghote wriggled on his bench. "But what use would that be?" he said, the thought of how long he had been delayed in going home suddenly blooming in his mind. "I am not at all a fingerprint expert. I could not tell whether you are right or wrong, bhai."

"No—please to come. Please. I want one more pair of eyes to see what I have seen."

"No. I'm sorry, bhai," Ghote said, sweat springing up between his thighs despite the air-conditioned coolness all around. "I must really be going home. Already I am behind schedule one half hour. But I *will* come. First thing in the morning I will come to your cabin, I am promising."

He drained in one long swallow all the rest of his big glass of Ganga Jamuna. It had lost its chill and tasted only of sour sharpness. "But, listen, bhai," he said, looking across at Moos with all the seriousness he could command. "Think about what I have been saying, yes? Just only forget what you saw. Burn that record card. Or at least put it back into the files. Or, better still, do what they are

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doing in government offices with inconvenient letters. Misfile same. And then forget. Forget it all."

But Moos's big round face remained sullenly lugubrious.

"It has happened," he said dully. "It has happened, and I cannot forget it. I will remember all my life. In court also tomorrow I will not be able to forget." But he pushed himself to his feet and Ghote knew with a wash of inner relief that he himself was free now to go home, to cast off if he could the image of Moos's woebegone face.

"Well, tomorrow we will see," he said. "Go back to your quarters now and get a good night's sleep. In the morning it will all look very much of rosier."

"Yes, I will go. No. No, I will take one more look at those prints. One final final check. Yes, I must. I must. Goodnight, bhai. And thank you for listening to me."

Moos had never before offered a word of thanks for all the long hours Ghote had spent hearing his talk of radial loops, ulnar loops, twinned loops, and lateral pocket loops, or whatever aspect of his obsession happened to come into his mind at any one time. And Ghote now was sharply conscious of the change. For an instant he wondered whether he ought after all to go back to Headquarters and let Moos show him the wretched, damnable record card, little though he probably would be able to make of it. But the thought of Protima waiting for him—or, more to the point, the thought of a wrathful Protima waiting—deterred him.

"Goodnight then, bhai," he said. "See you first thing in the morning."

In a way, however, Ghote saw Moos much sooner than first thing next morning. He saw him in his head through most of that night. He had been unable, indeed, to rid himself of the thought of Moos and his terrible discovery from the moment he had left him. He had been thoroughly poor company for Protima all the evening, till eventually she said that if she was not going to get one word out of him she might as well go early to bed as she had done every night of the week.

And when, after sitting for half an hour trying to push from his mind every looming remembrance of Moos and his fearful horn-sharp dilemma and not succeeding, he went to bed himself, he found, tired though he felt—bone-tired suddenly—that he still could not chase away the sight of Moos's round face, for once without a dan-

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gling wet-tipped cigarette at its center, and the look of battered hopelessness in his eyes.

Wryly, he thought of the advice he had offered with such conviction. To forget. To blot it all out. He had said to Moos he was going to do that himself—and here he was, completely unable so much as to begin.

Was Moos really right in the discovery? Had he actually, point by point, seen incontrovertible evidence that the two fingerprints from the hands of different men were exactly and absolutely the same? Could he, despite his years-long reputation, have been mistaken?

Had he—this was a new, sudden thought—had he somehow *desired* to make his discovery, appalling though it had seemed to him? Had he in his innermost self wanted to make it? That chance of two prints being identical, however mathematically unlikely, might well be something that obscurely would haunt someone as obsessed with fingerprints as Moos. So had he, perhaps driven by that obsession to the point of madness, gone so far as actually to invent what he had most dreaded? It was possible. Possible.

Now, violently, Ghote wished he had after all gone to see those two record cards. He would not have been able to make any expert comparison, but he might have been able to see enough to decide there was a prima facie case. Or not. He might even with a single glance have realized that the prints on the two cards were in no way like each other, and have then sadly to have had to escort a mad Moos to the pagalkhana.

Then, lying in the dark and biting his lower lip in vexation, he told himself that this was the merest wishful thinking. Of course Moos, star witness in hundreds of cases involving fingerprints, never successfully challenged, never found wrong, was bound to be right in what he had seen with his own eyes. Yes, the whole huge edifice of fingerprinting was on the point of tumbling down. Tomorrow in the Bombay High Court when Sergeant Moos was called to give evidence, a whole new era in criminology would begin. A black era.

At last sleep spread over him.

A sleep plagued with dreams. He saw Moos sitting opposite him in the Badshah Juice Bar and showing him all his fingers and thumbs, each one of them with the same pattern clear to be seen. Whirling, twirling question marks. He saw Moos in the High Court witness box, standing on his head. He saw the judges themselves

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shrinking and shrinking away into nothingness. He saw his own fingers, and there were no tips to them at all.

He woke early, was as bad-tempered as he had been the evening before, pushed aside the beautifully crisp puris Protima had cooked for his breakfast, stamped out well before his accustomed time, and rode his motor-scooter down to Headquarters with unaccustomed recklessness.

He had thought, on arriving, that he might even be too early for Moos. But it seemed not. There was a light on in his cabin, the lines of it bright above and below the door.

Strange, he thought.

But perhaps Moos was taking one more look at that fearful evidence and had given himself the very strongest possible light to check on each and every one of those inescapable points of correspondence.

Ghote turned the knob and opened the door.

The moment he stepped into the little crowded room, where the fan in the ceiling was whirring grindingly, he realized he was seeing something which at the back of his mind he had been expecting all along, for all that he had pushed the thought down.

Old Moos was slumped across his examination bench in a limp heap. Beside him was a small blue-glass bottle with squared-off sides, its stopper out. Ghote, at that moment, was unable to recall the name of the liquid it had contained, though only a month earlier Moos had shown him the bottle and told him at length for what abstruse purpose he used minute quantities of its contents. "I have to keep always under lock and key itself," he had said. "It is a Number One dangerous poison."

On the table almost directly in front of the cabin's door there was a large stiff brown envelope. On it, in staring block capitals, was Ghote's name.

He took a step forward and picked it up. But for a moment he found himself totally incapable of opening it.

What if inside there were, as surely there were bound to be, two fingerprint record cards, each bearing a different name, each with the same absolutely identical print? Had the burden which Moos had found too much for him been transferred to his own shoulders? Was he going to be left with the evidence, incontrovertible evidence, that there could be two totally identical fingerprints? And if he was, would he now be able to do what he had with such easy assurance

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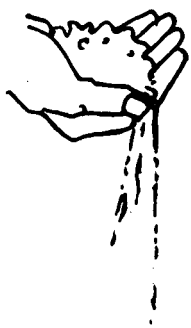
told Moos he would be able to do? To forget that he had ever known of their existence?

Yet, just possibly, one single glance at the cards might be enough to tell him that poor Moos had been driven by his obsession into the mere delusions of insanity.

With sweaty, trembling fingers he tore away the top of the envelope, turned it upside down, and tipped its contents onto the table in front of him: a small pile of grey ashes.



ON OUR COVER

Lawrence Block has written over 50 books, but is possibly best known for his two successful series of detective novels, the humorous escapades of the cat burglar, Bernie Rhodenbarr *(The Burglar Who Liked To Quote Kipling),* and the more somber adventures of ex-NYPD cop, Matt Scudder *(When the Sacred Gin Mill Closes).* Both characters have been portrayed on the screen—Bernie, after first being transformed into Bernice, by Whoopi Goldberg in *Burglar,* and Scudder by Jeff Bridges in *Eight Million Ways To Die.*

Mr. Block also writes extensively about the art of fiction as contributing editor to *Writer's Digest* and in his wide-selling *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit.*

Mr. Block and his wife have no permanent residence—they are constantly on the road, seeking out those cities with the word "Buffalo" in their names.

His most recent novel is *Out on the Cutting Edge,* due for release this fall from William Morrow & Co.

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Our company's intention is to produce a select number of high-quality items—items that you will cherish for years. We need your help to ensure that we produce items that suit this occasion.

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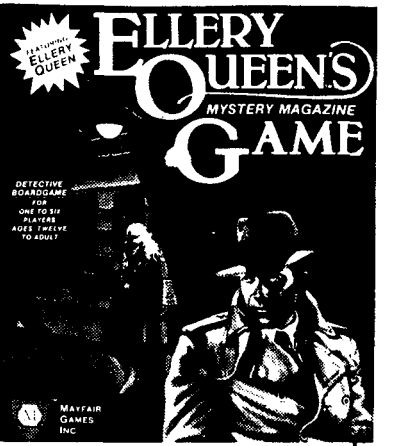

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